

VIRGIN AND WHORE NO MORE:  
REINVENTIONS OF THE MYTHICAL MATERNAL IN CHICANA DRAMA  
1965-2000

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**VIRGIN AND WHORE NO MORE: REINVENTIONS OF THE MYTHICAL  
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University of Pittsburgh, 2013

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines reimaginings of the mythical maternal in the developing Chicana feminist theatre from 1965 through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It first explores the mythical and historical roots of the figures of Gloria Anzaldúa's *tres madres*: the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona; as well as Nahua goddesses including Coatlicue and Tonantzin. In doing so, it highlights various scenarios of motherhood deployed within the colonial context and within the Chicano nationalist movement, each of which has been used to define and constrain Chicana woman- and motherhood. It then chronicles some of the efforts of Chicana feminists within and at the fringes of the movement to contest and revise these scenarios of motherhood as they were reproduced on the Chicano stage in the 1960s and 1970s. By the late 1980s, after the publication of *Borderlands: La Frontera*, and thanks in large part to the mentorship of Maria Irene Fornes, more individually-written Chicana plays began to appear on US stages. These plays, including *Simply*

*Maria or the American Dream* by Josefina Lopez, *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)* by Edit Villareal, and *The Fat-Free Chicana and the Snow Cap Queen* by Elaine Romero, often deployed comedy to explore the experience of individual Chicanas coming of age on the physical and cultural border between the US and Mexico. As the turn of the century approached, Chicana playwrights expanded their dramatic vision from the experience of the individual Chicana in the present to a perspective that encompassed the past, present, and even the imagined future. In doing this, playwrights like Cherrie Moraga and Josefina López confronted issues of race, gender, and sexuality through the deployment of mythical mothers in tragic formations.

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## **PREFACE**

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# **1.0 INTRODUCTION: MYTH, THEATER, AND THE CHICANA MOTHER**

Rule 2: Retain control of your own publicity.

The past is the present. Women are women, balls, balls.

.....

Rule 8: Insist on personal interviews.

The past is the present, remember. Men carved me, wrote my story, and Eve's, Malinche's, Guadalupe's, Llorona's.

Pat Mora, "Coatlicue's Rules: Advice from an Aztec Goddess"

## **1.1 CONSTRUCTING A HISTORY**

The history of the Chicana theatre is told to us in bits and pieces over a maze of book chapters, journal articles, and play scripts. It must be pieced together and interpreted out of the depths of books on Chicano Theatre and "Women of Color," Hispanic, and Latina Theatre. The history of the Chicana theatre exists in the plays, in the interviews, in the personal stories of the women who first carved out, then claimed and continually reclaimed a place for their voice on

the stage and in the world. The project of compiling a comprehensive history of the Chicana theatre, one that chronicles the efforts of Chicanas in all aspects of performance, production, and playwriting over the past century, has not yet been undertaken, and it must be. In an effort to contribute to that project, this dissertation weaves a history of the Chicana theatre through analysis of plays and performance pieces by Chicanas in the period 1965 – 2000. Because the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona figure so prominently in the Chicano/a imagination and have been used effectively by so many Chicana feminist writers, artists, and scholars, I have chosen to focus my analysis on plays which grapple with these and other mythical constructions of motherhood.

Though Chicanas initially struggled with a lack of access and training, the past few decades have seen a constantly-growing list of Chicana playwrights working in the United States. The selection of works created before 1987 is limited by the availability of texts and the comparatively small number of Chicana-written dramatic works up to that point, but recent years have seen a significant increase in Chicana playwriting. The shift from famine to feast in terms of Chicana dramatic production can be explained by a number of factors, which I address in Chapter Three. The imbalance in the number of available plays in different periods made the selection of works for this study a challenging undertaking. Since my frame for this study is the construction of motherhood through mythology, my primary category of selection was the playwright's approach to the mythical maternal. I chose plays that I felt dealt

with the subject in ways that were both particularly illuminating and demonstrative of the tactics being employed by Chicana feminists in the larger social context.

## **1.2 CONTEXT**

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chicana/os used theatre as a means of social protest. Beginning with short, agit-prop sketches performed by and for farmworkers in the grape fields of California, El Teatro Campesino began a Chicano theatre movement that came, in many ways, to work in concert with the Chicano Nationalist Movement. Chicano theatre as a movement has spanned decades and endured many transformations along the way. In the early years, male-run *teatros*, like the encompassing Chicano Nationalist Movement, were primarily concerned with labor issues and cultural nationalism, and the concerns of the Chicana in particular were viewed as irrelevant to the cause. The role of the Chicana was assumed to be in support of the Chicano, as the spiritual center of the family and the facilitator of racial continuity, not as a separate social actor with separate concerns and needs.

Chicanas working in the movement in general and in the theatre in particular found themselves struggling against entrenched misogyny within their community as well as racial and economic inequality in the larger social context of the United States. In response to resistance from within the Chicano community, Chicana feminists sought modes of expression apart from male-

run theatres in order to claim performative space for addressing their unique struggles.

A key component of the Chicana's oppression within the Chicano community is the cultural expectation of motherhood as the Chicana's primary function and, historically, the construction of Chicana motherhood through centuries-old mythology. The available archetypes of motherhood dictated their dramatic rendition centuries later: the Virgin of Guadalupe, the "brown virgin," mother of God and protectress of her people; La Malinche, "la chingada (the fucked one)," who sold the Aztecs out to Cortés; and La Llorona, the "weeping woman," who murdered her children because her lover betrayed her. Chicano Nationalist ideology defined a "good" mother as virginal, obedient, self-sacrificing, and saintly, like the Virgin of Guadalupe; women who embraced their sexuality, challenged the male-dominated power structures, and demanded consideration for their concerns were coded as Malinches. Women who did not embrace motherhood were Lloronas.

These mythical mothers were not just underlying metaphors for the Chicana experience; in the context of the Chicano Nationalist Movement, they were actively used to control women's behavior.

Chicano males who ascribed to a literal sense of cultural nationalism were engaged in what became known as 'Malinche baiting.' ... La Malinche became a symbol used to taunt and denigrate the Chicana feminists who challenged the sexism of the Chicano movement. Relegated to subordinate roles that

encouraged women to take on domestic activities during the movement, women who wanted more active roles as leaders in the public realm were susceptible to being labeled a 'Malinche.'

(Aldama and Quiñonez 137)

Instead of allowing these archetypes of motherhood to defeat them, Chicana feminists endeavored to claim the mythical maternal and rewrite their stories.

### **1.3 SCENARIOS OF MOTHERHOOD**

In her book, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor addresses the concept of “*scenario* as a paradigm for understanding social structures and behaviors” (29). She describes scenario in detail, using six characteristics. According to Taylor, the scenario requires a “scene” which includes both a physical location and the trappings of class and historical moment that help provide context; (29) and it “requires us to wrestle with the social construction of bodies in particular contexts” (29). Third, “scenarios ... are formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody, and change” (31). There is an expected outcome, but scenarios do not require that outcome, making the scenario flexible and subject to revision. Fourth, the scenario “reflects the multifaceted systems at work ... [I]n passing it on, we can draw from ... the multiplicity of forms of transmission” (31); fifth, it “forces us to situate ourselves in relationship to it;” and, last, it “usually works through

reactivation rather than duplication” (32). That is, the scenario is not necessarily mimetically recreated but is rather evoked, triggering a shared cultural memory without the need for direct imitation.

Taylor uses for her example the scenario of conquest, but the concept of the scenario is a useful frame of inquiry when exploring the use of mythology to construct and constrain Chicana motherhood because, “the scenario more fully allows us to keep both the social actor and the role in view simultaneously and thus recognize the uneasy fits and areas of tension” (Taylor 55). It helps us to see both the lived experience of the Chicana mother and the constructed mythology of that mother existing simultaneously in order to understand the ways in which the mythology of motherhood has both created and damaged the Chicana mother.

There are, essentially, two scenarios of Chicana motherhood at work in Chicana identity construction: Malinche/Llorona and Guadalupe. I will discuss these figures in detail in the first chapter, but the distinction between the two scenarios is often simplified to the “virgin/whore” dichotomy. The Malinche/Llorona scenario appears in two variations. In both, there is a conquered mother: a woman with indigenous blood, facing colonization by the white male conqueror. She submits to him sexually, making herself complicit in her own colonization and polluting herself and the blood of her children. In Malinche’s case, she is used as the instrument through which her people are destroyed; in Llorona’s case, she is rejected and driven to infanticide by her conqueror’s betrayal. In both, the mother’s sexuality leads her to betray her

race at terrible cost. By contrast, the Guadalupe scenario presents the virginal and self-sacrificing mother who is impervious to the conquest, who guides and protects her children in order to protect and preserve the Nation. Guadalupe's strength is in her purity and obedience; she is the male-defined ideal mother to her people.

As Chicana women in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century interacted with these competing scenarios, it became evident that neither could encompass or express the lived experience of the Chicana mother. Faced with available scenarios for motherhood, and developing her own personal relationship to motherhood (as a mother, a daughter, and/or a granddaughter), the Chicana encounters a disconnect between her own experience of mothering and motherhood as constructed through the ubiquitous figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona.

Chicana feminists in a range of fields contested these scenarios, attempting to redefine woman- and motherhood on their own terms. Chicana theatre practitioners were no exception to this, and their plays and performance work display a concentrated effort to dismantle the limited understanding of Chicana potential defined by Malinche, Llorona, and Guadalupe. The playwrights and performers in this study struggle with these archetypal mothers in a variety of ways as they construct new understandings of mothers, motherhood, and the mother/child relationship in their performances. However, they consistently challenge and ultimately reject the culturally-ingrained expectation that a "good mother" must adhere to the



archetype of La Virgen, and a “bad mother” is necessarily like La Malinche or La Llorona. In fact, these artists reject the assumption that La Malinche and La Llorona are/were “bad mothers” to begin with.

## **1.4 PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER**

In the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chicanas’ tactics for challenging established scenarios of motherhood included a range of theatrical activity, reusing and reimagining established theatrical forms as well as adopting new forms and new approaches. This dissertation chronicles the efforts of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicana theatre artists to build a Chicana theatre that redefined woman- and motherhood on their own terms.

Though the early years of the Chicano theatre movement were characterized by a resistance to Chicana concerns, Chicanas nonetheless sought and found ways to express their own experience on the stage. These efforts began in small, women-only collectives and in groups of performers and writers working together to create performative presentations of poetry and prose which came to be known as *teatropoesía*. By the 1980s, Chicanas had begun to develop both the theatrical training and the analytical focus to create single-author, one-act and full-length plays that portrayed the struggles of young Chicanas in the process of identity formation. In the later years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chicana playwrights began to experiment again, with the tragic

form, creating complex, epic-scale plays that took on the many mythical models at work in the construction of the Chicana mother.

In the first chapter, I offer a brief survey of Chicana feminism in the context of the Chicano Nationalist movement before moving on to explore established scenarios of motherhood, along with Chicana revisions of those scenarios. This chapter includes a detailed history and analysis of the myths of Guadalupe, Malinche, and Llorona, as well as of ancient Nahua goddesses like Tonantzin and Coatlicue. I use both Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking work in Border Theory and Diana Taylor's scenarios to illuminate the context for and characters at work in my investigation, as well as their magnitude in the mythology and the daily life of Chicanos and Chicanas.

The second chapter begins with a condensed history of the Chicano theatre movement, starting from the work of Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino (ETC). I discuss the deployment of mythical mothers in the plays produced by ETC, as well as the experience of Chicanas within the male-run *teatros*. In the first two decades of the Chicano theatre movement, Chicanas were actively discouraged from taking on leadership roles within the movement, a fact that led them to seek alternatives to participation in established *teatros*. These alternatives included creating new collective *teatros* invested in addressing issues important to Chicanas, as well as experimenting with the new dramatic form, *teatropoesía*. Woman-run collectives like Teatro de las Chicanas gave young Chicanas exposure to the tactics of agit-prop theatre, as well as a safe theatrical space to confront the misogyny and racism they

experienced. *Teatropoesía* performances provided an alternative to the forms of the *Teatro* movement and offered Chicana writers a pathway to performative writing before they had access to training as playwrights. The political and artistic legacies of Chicana-run collectives and *teatropoesía* are evident in the theatrical work of Chicanas in the decades that followed.

By the late 1980s, Chicana playwriting had begun to flourish, particularly due to the work being done by both Maria Irene Fornes at INTAR (International Arts Relations) and, to a slightly lesser extent, the Latino Theatre Institute at the Mark Taper Forum. In addition, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* had given voice to the critical perspective of the Chicana feminist in the borderlands. Chapter Three explores the impact of increased access and a critical grounding on the emerging Chicana theatre. The Chicana theatre was coming of age in this period, and the content of many Chicana plays dealt with the coming of age of young Chicanas in the borderlands. The plays I analyze in this chapter take varying approaches to communicating the struggles of Chicana identity formation, but all three use comedy to deploy a feminist critique of the scenarios of motherhood. In *Simply Maria, or the American Dream*, Josefina López places her title character in conflict with often hyperbolic specters of the life she is expected to live as wife and mother, contrasting them with the young woman's desire to continue her education. Edit Villareal refers to *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)* as "a comedy of assimilation" (Koehler). Her play features a young Chicana mother, remembering her upbringing in the home of her strong-willed and wise

grandmother and her pious and crazy great-aunt – figures who belie a traditional expectation of motherhood and mothering. The pious aunt is a terrible mother figure, and the rebellious grandmother is a practical and generous role model. Finally, I look at Elaine Romero's *The Fat Free Chicana and the Snow Cap Queen*, which deals humorously with the conflict a young Chicana faces between her traditional upbringing and her college education. The conflict in this play centers on a key aspect of culture: food. The protagonist, Amy, and her family must find a balance between the traditional and the new in order to reestablish a healthy order to their lives and the family restaurant, Café Lindo.

With their newfound access to training, as well as stages on which to produce their work, these playwrights continue a tradition of political theatre, using comedy to take on the *tres madres* in an effort to communicate the struggle of a generation of Chicanas to define their identity in the borderlands between cultures. In Chapter Four, I look at two plays from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that demonstrate the maturation of the Chicana theatre. Unlike the coming-of-age comedies I analyze in the previous chapter, these works are politically-driven tragedies that span centuries. Josefina López's *Unconquered Spirits* juxtaposes two reimaginings of the La Llorona story: one set at the moment of the conquest in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century and the other set during a pecan-shellshellers' strike in the 1930s. López's protagonists sacrifice themselves and their children for the greater good, providing a hopeful turn at the conclusion of their intensely painful journeys. Though the play's central focus is a

reinterpretation of La Llorona, López infuses the play with a sense of the empowering force of the pre-Columbian goddess Tonantzin, and figures Tonantzin as the site of origination and reclamation for the weeping mothers in the play. Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* presents a formal and ideological challenge to established modes of constructing motherhood. She simultaneously manipulates the tragic form to political ends and reinvents a wide array of mythical mother figures, from the *tres madres* to Euripides' Medea to the ancient myth of the Hungry Woman. Moraga's futuristic play challenges accepted understandings and expectations of race, gender, and sexuality by positioning a queer Chicana mother in conflict with the social forces that have exiled her and her loved ones from their homeland. Moraga's play, I argue, offers an excellent example of syncretic literature – combining the forms and themes of Western and Nahua cultures. This syncretic approach affords Moraga the ability to demonstrate the crisis of the Chicana, whose life embodies the often painful and uneasy intersection of these cultures and to propose a strategy for empowering the Chicana through her connection with a newly understood reading of the mythical maternal.

## **2.0 CHAPTER ONE: CHICANA MOTHERHOOD AT THE INTERSECTION OF MYTH, FOLKLORE, AND HISTORY**

### **2.1 CONSTRUCTING AND REVISING THE CHICANA MOTHER**

Before I begin to look at Chicana representations of motherhood on the stage, it is necessary to provide some historical and cultural context for the work of late-20<sup>th</sup> century Chicana *teatristas*. Because neither Chicano Nationalism nor second-wave feminism adequately addresses the challenges faced by Chicanas, Chicana feminism exists, to a certain extent, in the bordered space between the two. The Chicana's is an existence heavily impacted by a variety of borders, both literal and metaphorical. "Chicanas ... have been forced to confront the inability of many world views accurately to reflect their experiences. The very essence of some 'Chicanas'[sic] identity is a life lived between two cultures" (Sanchez-Lazer, 31). It is no surprise, then, that one of the most influential documents of Chicana feminism has been Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, first published in 1987. Anzaldúa's theorizing about the New Mestiza provides an excellent example of Chicana feminists' thinking about mythology and motherhood, and her work marks a turning point in the theoretical and artistic work of Chicana feminists. Also helpful in engaging the entrenched

myths of motherhood is the concept of scenario, outlined by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. As previously indicated, Taylor elucidates scenario as a way to understand social structures. Scenarios are culturally-adopted, performative frameworks, specific to a particular context, with recognizable participants and outcomes that are generally predictable. By looking at the performance of motherhood as a scenario, we acknowledge its constructedness. Therefore, we can better recognize the extent to which prescribed notions of motherhood fail to fit the lived experience of the Chicana.

In Anzaldúa's work, including her discussion of the *tres madres* of the Chicano people, we begin to see why mythical representations of motherhood figure so prominently in Chicana dramatic literature. Chicano nationalism relies heavily on indigeneity and mythology in defining what it means to be Chicano. Myth and folklore contribute a great deal to formations of Chicano (and Chicana) identity; Chicanas learn the definitions of "motherhood" through the characters of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. But a cultural familiarity with and attachment to the characters is only one side of the story. In addition, an understanding of and ability to operate in dialogue with the myths and folklore of Greater Mexico marks an artist as genuinely Chicana/o. Given the fact that Chicana feminists have been accused of abandoning their race in favor of feminism, their use of mythology and folklore to "talk back" to the movement and acknowledge and revise scenarios of motherhood demonstrates a connection to, rather than an abandonment of, their racial heritage (Alarcón, "Chicana Feminisms" 184).

From the discussion of myth's importance to Chicana feminism, I will move on to an exploration of the mythology in play through the rest of this dissertation. Although the mother characters I will be examining technically come from history (La Malinche), folklore (La Llorona), and myth (Guadalupe and the Nahua goddesses), I believe they all qualify as mythical figures. The overlapping interpretations of the various mother figures in the mythology claimed by Chicano nationalism frequently blur the lines between history, myth, and folklore. For example, though La Malinche was a real historical figure, her role in the creation story of the Mexican and Chicano people places her as the mythical mother of the race. In addition, while La Llorona has certainly become part of the folklore of Greater Mexico, we can trace her origins to pre-Columbian mythology. The characters in question defy easy categorization, as we will see, and Chicana feminists emphasize this fact as they attempt to redefine and reconstitute the maternal archetypes available to them.

The malleability of the *tres madres* is generally ignored in their deployment by Chicano Nationalism—Guadalupe is the Good Mother, Llorona is the Terrible—and Terrifying—Mother, and Malinche is the Ruined Mother. But Chicana feminists reject static understandings of the *tres madres*, instead taking them as scenarios to be revised.

Scenarios are restated both for maintenance (namely, they serve to solidify and adjust hegemonic agendas) and for emergence (instantiating the presence of new formations, deviations, and



alliances that are yet to be fully recognized). Scenarios are thus both effective and affective. (Cabranes-Grant 517)

Chicana feminists restate the scenarios of motherhood, revising their context and their outcomes in order to explore the potential of the *tres madres* to perform the multifaceted potential of the Chicana mother.

## **2.2 CHICANO NATIONALISM, MYTH, AND CHICANA FEMINISTS**

Active in both the Chicano Nationalist movement and second-wave feminism, Chicanas have historically found themselves in the unenviable position of being both but neither: having a stake in both movements but lacking adequate representation in either. Chicano nationalists considered women's issues to be secondary, or even irrelevant, to La Causa. And second-wave feminism in the United States was, by and large, a movement of white, middle-class women. The women's liberation movement frequently ignored or minimized race as an issue, leaving feminists of color with no movement to call their own.

Participation in the Chicano nationalist movement gave Chicana feminists both the political awareness and the coalition-building skills to demand attention for their concerns in spite of attempts on the part of movement leaders to diminish their voice (García, Alma 219). The movement was dominated by men and prioritized racial unity over all else, so when Chicanas began to demand a voice for their concerns, the movement leadership sought to control the expression of

those demands. “The most nefarious example of this ... phenomenon was the 1969 National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference where the Chicana workshop concluded that Chicanas did not wish to be liberated from sexism at the moment” (Licón 111). Chicanas who continued to pursue a feminist agenda were labeled *malinchistas*: traitors to their race. Without initial support from either the Chicano Nationalist movement or second-wave feminisms, Chicana feminists continued to press for change, and over the ensuing decades, they have managed to carve out theoretical, political, and artistic space for their unique voices.

One of the overriding characteristics of Chicano Nationalism is its focus on myth and indigeneity. “The idea of Aztlán – the reputed home of the Aztecs before they founded Tenochtitlán – has long been one of the founding concepts of Chicano identity” (Watts 305). Chicano writers, artists, and theorists understand the Chicano nation as a people trying to reclaim their ancestral home and their ancestral selves. The attachment to myth pervades Chicano movement rhetoric: the foundational document of the movement is “El plan espiritual de Aztlán.” For the Chicana feminist, this means two things: that womanhood and motherhood are defined for the Chicana through myth, and that myth provides a vehicle for speaking back to the movement.

A second key feature of Chicano nationalism is its emphasis on the family and its emphatic placement of the mother as the keeper of the culture.

The Chicana is a teacher in many respects. She upholds the traditions and customs of her people. She is a liason [sic] between

the new ideas set forth by the young and the ideals maintained by the old. The Chicana's activities in the *barrio demand a twenty-four* hour day, yet she continues to carry on her family role ... The Chicana understands the role of the Chicano and works alongside of him. She is a woman she (sic) understands that she has to work twice as hard to prove herself. She is capable of being an artist, a writer, a poet, a historian, and a lawyer. She does not, however, forsake her role as a mother and a wife. She is a Chicana! (*El Popo* 3, Quoted in Licon 107)

This description, from a newspaper published by the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (Chicana/o Student Movement of Aztlán, or MEChA) chapter at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in 1970, neatly summarizes the Chicano nationalist view of the Chicana in the early years of *el movimiento*. She has the potential to be anything she wants to be, but she must always place her duty to her man and her family first. Her role is to be mother and wife, at the side of the Chicano.

On the surface of it, this view of womanhood was one Anglo feminists encountered at the time, as well (and one they continue to encounter today). Certainly second-wave feminists from the white middle-class have written extensively about the difficulty in balancing career and family in a culture that expects home and childcare to be "women's work." But, on deeper inspection, this represents a point of departure between second-wave (white) feminism and Chicana feminism. Far more often than is the case among Anglo feminists, the

Chicana identifies, and even embraces, motherhood as a given. For the Chicana feminist, motherhood is a fact of her life and a fact of her culture. Chicana feminists deal with this reality by making space for motherhood within their feminism and by leveraging motherhood as an empowering space for female energy. Rather than positioning it as something women do in addition to their feminist activities, Chicana feminists often view motherhood itself as an expression of feminism.

As a consequence of this move to include, rather than exclude, motherhood as part of feminism, Chicana feminists silence the critics within Chicano nationalism who accuse feminists of “selling out” to white culture. Again, Chicana feminists’ efforts to create theoretical and artistic space for their voices were tempered by a desire to ensure that their efforts would be understood and accepted by Chicano nationalism.

## **2.3 THE CHICANA’S MYTHICAL MOTHERS**

### **2.3.1 ANZALDÚA’S *TRES MADRES* – SCENARIOS OF MOTHERHOOD**

Part of the ongoing task of feminists the world over has been freeing the definition of womanhood from patriarchally-constructed constraints, and the work of Chicana feminists has often been along these lines, as well. Chicana feminist theorist Alicia Gaspar del Alba identifies the three archetypes of womanhood available to the Chicana: “la madre, la virgin, y la puta” (the mother, the virgin, and the whore) (51). This complaint was echoed by the

women of El Teatro Campesino when they discussed the roles available to them in the company's productions. Intriguingly, however, when looking to the mythology of womanhood in Mexican and Chicano culture, it becomes evident that the three most prevalent icons of womanhood *are all mothers*: the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. I argue that the three archetypes of womanhood available to Chicanas are in fact, *la madre virginal, la madre putesca, y la madre terrible* (the virginal mother, the whorish mother, and the terrible mother). Gloria Anzaldúa, as part of an effort to reclaim these figures from their patriarchal construction, points out:

*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres.* All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother who [sic] we have abandoned, and La Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two ... .In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and La Llorona to make us long-suffering people. (*Borderlands: La Frontera* 30)

Importantly, Anzaldúa points to each mother's function in "making" "*la gente Chicana*."

Archetypes of motherhood are not, of course, unique to Greater Mexico. Carl Jung writes at length about the mother archetype in *The Archetypes and*

*the Collective Unconscious*, and the archetypes outlined in this chapter have parallels in many world religions and mythologies. When Jung identifies the “three essential aspects of the mother: her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic emotionality, and her Stygian depths” (82), it is almost as if he is listing the *tres madres*: Guadalupe the good; Malinche the whorish; Llorona the murderous. The fact of maternal archetypes in the mythology of Greater Mexico is not the key point here, however. Rather, it is how the deployment of these archetypes has impacted identity formation for the Chicana and how Chicana feminists have reclaimed these ubiquitous figures in order to pursue their agenda of gender equality. For the Chicana, the *tres madres* are not simply abstract characters from myth and folklore. They are defining forces in the creation of Chicana/o identity: scenarios performed for and by generations of Chicanas in the course of maintaining the male-determined organization of Chicano culture.

This trinity of Chicana mothers has a centuries-long history in the cultural productions of the Americas; their stories have been told and re-told (mostly by men) and have shifted over the course of history according to the model of motherhood they were meant to create. It is only in the past few decades that feminist artists and scholars have begun the effort to reimagine them as feminist icons rather than patriarchally-limited models of womanhood (Maldonado, 5). A significant part of this reimagining has involved searching for pre-conquest roots of maternal mythology. My exploration of the Chicana’s mythical models of motherhood will begin with those roots.

As will become evident almost immediately, there is a great deal of layering and overlap at play in the myth, historical record, and contemporary deployments of the mythological maternal, and the dividing lines are never completely clear. Guadalupe is Tonantzin is Coatlicue is Llorona is Malinche, or so it can be read, and this bleedthrough from one mother to another highlights a basic flaw in the virgin/whore paradigm that Chicano Nationalist rhetoric attempts to establish around motherhood. Every mother contains the full range of possible definitions of motherhood, a fact that Chicana feminists highlight in order to remove the limitations imposed on Chicana motherhood.

## **2.4 THE PRE-COLUMBIAN MATERNAL**

At first glance, the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona look like post-conquest figures. To some extent, they are, but as we shall see, they have deep roots in indigenous mythology and culture – roots that have been rejected or heavily revised over the centuries since the conquest. In addition to these three figures, Chicana feminists have sought another set of maternal role models to draw from: the Nahua goddesses. The term “Nahua” encompasses the indigenous peoples of central Mexico from around the 10<sup>th</sup> century until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It also includes those people who trace their religious and ethnic history to that time and place. It includes the Aztecs, the Toltecs, and other peoples of central Mexico (Lara, 100).

The Chicana mother as defined by the Chicano nationalist movement is limited by the constraints of the *tres madres*; a mother can be a pure, obedient, Christian woman; a victim whose passivity has destroyed her people; a traitor to her race; or a murderer. But, of course, this limited view does not embrace either the lived reality of the Chicana mother or the indigenous myths of motherhood. For the Chicana feminist, the indigenous myths are a source of empowerment because, while Aztec civilization was far from kind, or even egalitarian, towards women, the Nahua moral code's emphasis on balance in all things provides far more fertile grounds for understanding motherhood.

As I have discussed, Chicanas attempting to redefine motherhood through mythology have sought to retain connections with Chicano nationalism, and this includes an emphasis on *indigenismo*. Through the focus on indigenous mythology, Chicana feminists have reclaimed many mother goddesses and myths about motherhood from the Nahua past. "Rather than referring to Western feminist theory, Chicana revisions of Catholicism had their roots in Aztec and Mexican folk culture" (Messmer, 261). Some of the goddesses encompassed in this venture include Tonantzín (Revered Mother), Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt), Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman), Coatlalopeuh, the Cihuatateo, and the Hungry Woman. The female deities in Nahua mythology are often associated with the snake, as can be seen in the prevalence of "Coatl" (Snake) in the naming of the goddesses. Given the snake's role in the Old Testament, colonizing Catholics found it relatively simple to connect feminine



energy with evil and sin. But this was hardly the only misinterpretation of Nahua religion on the part of the Spanish.

#### **2.4.1 EMBRACING BOTH-AND: REINSCRIBING THE NAHUA WORLDVIEW ON MYTHICAL MOTHERS**

Understanding the Nahua goddesses requires understanding, at least somewhat, the Nahua worldview and its difference from the Catholic worldview. Rebecca Overmyer-Velásquez provides an excellent analysis of this difference in her article, “Christian Morality Revealed in New Spain: The Inimical Nahua Woman in Book Ten of the Florentine Codex.” She discusses the incompatibility of Catholic and Nahua worldviews:

For the Nahua, however, sexuality and the role of women before the Spanish invasion were conceived in different terms from those brought by Spanish missionaries. Nahua morality emphasized moderation in all things, from personal appearance to drug use and expressions of sexuality. (12)

Nahua belief systems prioritized balance in all things, including deities. Gods and Goddesses contained both sides of natural forces, and this duality was a desirable feature. So a goddess of creation was also one of destruction. A god of war was also a force of peace. Understanding the reasonable course and not pursuing one aspect to the exclusion of all else is valuable. And so, for example, Guadalupe’s eternal selflessness and passivity would make her an inadequate deity to the Nahua sensibility.

As the Catholic missionaries attempted to convert the indigenous people, they sought to demonize the goddesses of the indigenous religions by defining them as whorish and evil. The mismatch in basic morality between Nahua and Catholicism made this task quite difficult. Nahuatl has no word for virgin, nor for whore.

Christians used the Nahuatl word for a pre-pubescent girl, *ichpochtli*, to mean virgin. Moreover, the closest word to "whore" in Nahuatl was *auiani* (or *ahuiani*), "the joyful one," that refers to "pleasure girls," women who provided sexual pleasure in state-controlled or independent "Houses of Joy" and participated in ceremonial festivals, but who were not associated with "sin" as *putas* were within a Spanish moral system. (Lara 103)

The obstacles of language and morality were daunting, but over time, of course, Spanish Catholicism took root, and the Nahua people were acculturated. Chicano nationalism purports to seek a return to the indigenous, but Chicana feminists argue that it does not go far enough because it sustains the Christian dichotomization of womanhood.

As neither "virgins" nor "whores" in classic Nahua thought, *Tonantzín*, *Cihuacóatl*, *Coatlicue*, *Tlazolteotl*, and similar sacred energies represent a perspective from which to analyze and transform the prevalent postcolonial dichotomy between virtuous *virgen* and pagan *puta*.(103)

Chicana feminists point out that the valorization of *machismo* and the propagation of virgin/whore paradigm set up by Guadalupe/Malinche are both evidence of the continued influence of the Catholic Church and the colonial impulse. In emphasizing balance and rejecting the kind of polarization evident in the male-centric nationalism put forward by the leaders of the Chicano Nationalist movement, Chicana feminists are depending upon the morality of the Nahuatl. By reclaiming both the figures from Nahuatl mythology and the Nahuatl morality of balance in all things, Chicanas open a dialogue with nationalist *indigenismo*, inviting a reinterpretation of motherhood that includes the full range of female potential.

## **2.5 LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE: MOTHERHOOD AS SELFLESSNESS (AND SEXLESSNESS)**

### **2.5.1 THE APPARITION OF THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE TO JUAN DIEGO**

The Virgin of Guadalupe is perhaps the most recognizable of the maternal icons in Chicano culture. Gloria Anzaldúa calls her “the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*” (*Borderlands* 52). She is the American face of the Catholic Virgin Mary, the Americas’ own holy mother. Over the course of the nearly 500 years since her initial appearance in 1531, she has been embraced as an envoy for the Catholic Church in the Americas, a symbol for Mexican, and later Chicano, nationalism, the patron saint of Mexico, a protector of the indigenous peoples of the

Americas, and an icon of idealized motherhood. She is, however, a more complicated figure than her ready acceptance by nationalists would suggest.

On December 9, 1531, a peasant named Juan Diego was walking from his home to Mexico City. On a hillside, he saw a young woman bathed in light. She spoke to him in his native language and instructed him to build her temple on the site.

... I am the ever holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God through whom one lives, Mother of the Creator of heaven and of earth.

I have a living desire that there be built a temple, so that in it I can show and give forth all my love, compassion, help, and defense, because I am your loving mother: to you, all who are with you, to all inhabitants of this land and to all who love me, call upon me, and trust in me. I will hear their lamentations and will remedy all their miseries, pains, and sufferings. (Elizondo, 75-79, Quoted in Rodriguez, 31)

After several attempts to convince the Bishop of the truth of his account, Juan Diego is instructed by the Lady of Guadalupe to go to the top of the hill to collect roses to bring to the Bishop as proof. Juan Diego follows her instructions, even though “the top of the hill was no place for flowers, because there are only cactus, mesquites, and other kinds of wild brush” (Elizondo, 75-79, quoted in Rodriguez, 35-6), and sure enough, the hill is covered with roses. He collects the flowers in his *tilma* (an outer garment somewhat like a poncho) and brings them to the Bishop. “As he unfolded his tilma, all the roses dropped

to the floor and as they did the precious image of the always holy virgin Mary, Mother of God, appeared on the *tilma* in the presence of the bishop and his household, the image, which has defied time and scientists, and appears just as beautiful today as on December 12, 1531” (Elizondo 75-79, quoted in Rodriguez 36). Indeed, the image of the Virgin on the *tilma* continues to be a source of religious and scholarly fascination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of the complications inherent in the conventional narrative of Guadalupe is the fact that she offers validation for the conquest by acting as cultural mediator between the Spanish Catholic conquistadors and the indigenous peoples. Ten years after the conquest, she appears to an indigenous man and instructs him to (a) announce her arrival to a Catholic bishop and (b) build a Catholic church on the site of a former temple to the goddess Tonantzin. So she is simultaneously the figurehead of Mexican and Chicano nationalism and a figurehead of a Church that supported the conquest of the indigenous people and their deities. Though the representatives of the Church in the Americas were initially skeptical about Guadalupe, she was eventually embraced by the Church. In 1998, Pope John Paul II declared the Virgin of Guadalupe patroness of the Americas.

The scenario of La Virgen of Guadalupe is deployed by the Catholic Church as a reason for and representation of the success of their missionaries’ work spreading Catholicism to the Americas; by Mexican and Chicano nationalists as support and protection for their people; and by Chicana

feminists as an example of mestizaje and feminine strength. How can one figure be deployed in such differing ways?

On the surface of it, the Virgin of Guadalupe is the Virgin Mary as she appeared in the Americas. She appeared to a Catholic convert, communicated through him to a Catholic Bishop, and instructed that a Catholic church should be built on the site of her appearance. She literally instructs the Catholics to construct a house of their religion over the remains of an Aztec temple, burying the old religion and replacing it with the religion of the conquerors. She is a symbol of, and in many ways the spokesperson for, Catholicism in the New World. With this interpretation, it's difficult to imagine why she has been so thoroughly embraced by the Mexican and Chicano nationalists. But this interpretation does not take into account the hybrid nature of Mexican and Chicano spirituality, or the hybridity of the Virgin of Guadalupe herself.

### **2.5.2 GUADALUPE, COATLICUE, TONANTZÍN**

One of the most notable features of Mexican/Chicano Catholicism is its hybridity. It infuses aspects of European Catholicism with the practices and iconography of native religions, and the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe can be seen as a visual representation of this hybridity. Jeannette Rodriguez offers an excellent analysis of the fusion of Christian and Aztec iconography in the image of Guadalupe in her book *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women*. She points out, among other

features: the presence of the *nagvioli*— a flower that symbolizes the sun god Huitzilopochtli—positioned just below the tassel, on Guadalupe’s womb; and the stars, rays of sunlight, moon and angel, each of which “relates directly to some aspect of Aztec divinity” (29). Ana Castillo tells us:

Like all mythistory there is no one version, one meaning, handed down to subsequent generations. The image, infused as much with the legend as with mystery and endless meaning, is a fusion of the Byzantine artform and Native American naturalism. (Xviii)

Rodriguez summarizes her analysis by explaining that “the image is not simply a picture, but a story made up of a number of symbols which spoke to the Nahuatl people in the sixteenth century” (30). These symbols continue to have relevance today.

More than the symbols of ancient religion in the image of Guadalupe, though, proponents of Mexican/Chicano *marianismo* point to the fact of the Virgin’s brown skin. Unlike the European Madonna figure, with her plainly Caucasian skin, Guadalupe looks like an indigenous woman. Her appearance marks her as one of the people of Mexico rather than as one of the colonizers, and has earned her the title, among others, of “Goddess of the Americas,” because she is understood as truly American. Nationalists embrace her uncritically as a symbol of their people and the “merging of *indigenismo* and Catholicism” (Garcia, Alesia, 32). Not only does Guadalupe look like an *indigena*, history tells us that in her hybridity, she offered the indigenous people a way to subversively continue their worship of Nahua deities in

conjunction with their Catholicism. Because of the movement's emphasis on both *indigenismo* and Catholicism, she provided a symbol of the "perfect" fusion of the two.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa conflates Guadalupe with Tonantzín and Coatlicue, asserting that the Goddess herself is in fact all of the above. She tells her readers that "the first step" in developing what she calls the "new mestiza" is "to unlearn the *puta/virgen* dichotomy and to see *Coatlalopeuh-Coatlicue* in the Mother, Guadalupe" (106). Sandra Cisneros adds "a pantheon of other mother goddesses" to this list (49), and goes on to say, "My *Virgen de Guadalupe* is not the mother of God. She is God." (50) These interpretations of the figure of Guadalupe are representative of Chicana feminist efforts to reclaim the power of the mother goddess through her.

For the Catholic Church, the Virgin of Guadalupe is an ambassador in the Americas, a validation of the work of missionaries in the New World, an example of purity and holiness. For the peoples of the Americas, the Virgin of Guadalupe is Goddess, Protectress, and Mother, and she provides justification for Mexican and Chicano Catholicism. That is, because she is a "brown Virgin," whose image links the colonizer (Spanish Catholicism) with the colonized (the indigenous people of the Americas), she can be claimed as a symbol of Mexican and Chicano nationalism. But her ready acceptance by Mexican and Chicano nationalists comes with its own constraints. "Rather than empowering women, the Chicano emphasis on Catholic family values supported patriarchal ideas of



*machismo* and male dominance in both the family and the public sphere.”(Messmer 260)

### **2.5.3 LA MADRE VIRGINAL NO MAS: IDEALIZATION AND REBELLION**

Guadalupe reflects, as do the other figures examined in this chapter, the divided (bordered) state of the Chicana identity – she is simultaneously a goddess, a nurturer, a selfless mother, and a powerful, demanding icon of womanhood to which Chicanas are expected to aspire. And so, Chicana feminists must find a way to resolve their affection for and resentment of her. Overwhelmingly, the strategy for accomplishing this resolution is to acknowledge her as another face of Tonantzín, “‘Our Mother.’ Our Mother was every mountain, every summit, sometimes hand-built, on which one could climb and pray to Mother Earth” (Castillo xvi). Tonantzín is “Mother Earth” – a source of creation and destruction. As a face of Tonantzín, Guadalupe is not simply the Virgin Mary in Mexico. Rather, she is one face of the goddess – the face she showed to the colonizers while revealing her continued presence to the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

Missionaries in the colonial moment seized the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe as an alternative to the pagan goddess, coloring Tonantzín as Guadalupe’s immoral other. In the meantime, Guadalupe gave the indigenous people a face of their goddess to honor without criticism from the colonizers. So the argument can be made that Guadalupe was a figure of constraint and control over the indigenous peoples, *or* that she offered them the freedom to

hybridize their belief systems with the belief systems forced on them by their colonizers. Both arguments have continued to be made about this complicated figure. For this reason she has been embraced by the Catholic Church as its American emissary and by the Mexican and Chicano nationalist movements as a valiant symbol of the power of the indigenous spirit and selfless, benevolent mother to a people. Her deployment by Chicana feminists has been, largely, a reaction against both the Catholic and the Nationalist interpretations.

For Chicana feminists, the problem with the Catholic interpretation of Guadalupe is, of course, its assumption that Guadalupe is simply the Virgin Mary as she appears in the Americas, rejecting altogether her connection to the Nahua goddess. The problem with the nationalist deployment of Guadalupe is that, while embracing the indigeneity of the figure and acknowledging her as a face of Tonantzín, it fails to embrace the fullness of Tonantzín. The Guadalupe who lives in the rhetoric of *La Raza* is more closely aligned with the Christian understanding of her than with the powerful indigenous goddess. She is the selfless, virginal mother of her people and she reinforces patriarchal expectations of womanhood: that women will act in support of men, will bear children, will be obedient and virtuous. A Chicana feminist exploration of Guadalupe demands that the both/and-ness of the indigenous goddess be acknowledged and embraced. To the Chicana feminist, Guadalupe is not the Virgin Mother. She is the Earth Mother, and her continued deployment in the service of patriarchy must be dismantled in order to liberate the Chicana woman.

## 2.6 LA MALINCHE: MOTHERHOOD AS BETRAYAL

La Malinche has long been a contested figure in the story of the Americas. Her participation in the conquest as interpreter and adviser to Cortés has opened her up to condemnation as a traitor to her race. The fact that she was also Cortés's mistress, and that she bore him a son, invites an interpretation of her as an example of negative female sexuality. Nationalist rhetoric from both the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano Movement has relegated her to a position some have described as "the Mexican Eve" – responsible for the downfall of her race. Adelaida Del Castillo, co-founder and editor of the Chicana feminist journal *Encuentro Feminil*, was one of the first feminists to revise and reframe the question of La Malinche. She writes:

History, literature, and popular belief normally introduce us to the story and image of Doña Marina, La Malinche, in either of three ways: (1) the woman is often presented very simply and insignificantly as just another part of the necessary backdrop to Cortés' triumphant conquest or, as is more commonly done, (2) her portrayal assumes synonymy with destruction when she is singled out as the sole cause of the fall of the "patria" and becomes the scapegoat for all Mexican perdition thereafter while, on the other hand, (3) romanticists find themselves almost instinctively driven to depicting Doña Marina as the misguided and exploited

victim of the tragic love affair which is said to have taken place between herself and Hernán Cortés. (122)

An examination of Malinche as she appears in the historical record, nationalist rhetoric, and feminist reclamations, shows us that these interpretations of Malinche are far from the whole picture.

### **2.6.1 HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS: MALINCHE IN THE COLONIAL MOMENT**

Known variously as Malintzín, Doña Marina, Malinalli Tenepal, La Malinche, and, pejoratively as *la chingada* and *la vendida*, La Malinche is an actual historical figure who has taken on a mythic significance in the story of the Mexican and Chicana/o people.

It is generally believed that La Malinche's indigenous name was Malinalli, the name of a day in the Aztec calendar which was represented by a twisted reed. Malinalli is the sign not only of a day but also refers to the helicoid symbol that binds the two opposing forces of the cosmos in constant movement, which makes the forces of the lower world rise and those of the heavens descend. The indigenous referred to her as Malintzin. To the Christians, she was known by her baptismal name of Dona Marina. (Franco 73)

Malinalli Tenepal was born around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to a Nahua family along Mexico's gulf coast. According to most accounts, her father died when she was young and her mother remarried. When her mother gave birth to

a son with her second husband, Malinalli was sold to Mayan slave traders in order to preserve the son's inheritance. It was as a slave that the young woman met Hernan Cortés and his soldiers in 1519. She was purchased and given to one of the noble members of Cortés's entourage. When that man returned to Spain shortly afterward, Cortés kept Malinalli, who spoke both Mayan and Nahuatl, as his interpreter and his mistress. Within the year, she was baptized with the name Doña Marina. Her role as interpreter placed her at the forefront of the conquest, for better or worse. Aztec codices of the time show her perpetually at Cortés's side. Spanish accounts of the conquest mostly minimize her role, but a few give her credit for her assistance in the conquest of the Aztec people (Candelaria 3).

Doña Marina's two roles – as mistress and as interpreter – interact in the historical records and cultural memory to create a highly conflicted lasting image. In 1523, Doña Marina gave birth to Hernan Cortés's son, Don Martín, who “was considered the first mestizo, origin of the Mexican nation, the union of the Amerindian and European” (Cypess 9). Malinche's role as interpreter and mother of the “first mestizo” might, from a certain (colonialist) historical perspective, mark her as a symbol of cooperation and a bridge between cultures. And certainly in the Spanish historical record, this is how she is presented – as a partner to Cortés and a connection between the Spanish and Nahua cultures. After initial accounts, little attention is paid to her memory by Spanish chronicles of the colonial period. In the wake of the Mexican Revolution, however, her image was excavated from the dust of history, and

she became both the consummate victim and a symbol of treachery and betrayal. She is, in Mexican and Chicano Nationalist discourse, the woman who sold out to the Spanish and essentially handed her people over to their conquerors.

### **2.6.2 LA MADRE PUTESCA: MALINCHE IN NATIONALIST RHETORIC**

In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz writes of the “Sons of Malinche” and, in doing so, he elucidates the Mexican Nationalist understanding of Malinche and her status as mother of the mestizo race.

In contrast to Guadalupe, who is the Virgin Mother, the *Chingada* is the violated Mother. Neither in her nor in the Virgin do we find traces of the darker attributes of the great goddesses ... Both of them are passive figures. Guadalupe is pure receptivity, and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passions. The *Chingada* is even more passive. Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood, and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides, as we said earlier, in her sex. (207)

Paz here emphasizes Malinche’s passivity and the passivity of all women and all mothers as descendants of either Guadalupe or Malinche. This might imply that Malinche is blameless, then, in the conquest: merely a victim of Spanish aggression. But Paz goes on to explain the Mexican nationalists’ continued hatred of Malinche:

It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. She embodies the open, the *chingado*, to our closed, stoic, impassive Indians. (25)

In short, Paz presents a Malinche that is both passive and traitorous, and argues for the ultimate orphanhood of the Mexican, who must reject both the colonial father (Spain) and the “fucked” mother (Malinche). Paz’s explication of Malinche is an illustration of the typical rhetoric about Malinche produced by post-Revolutionary Mexican and, later, Chicano nationalist leaders. Chicana feminists remind us, however, that Paz’s explication is a work of poetic refiguring and not a historical document. The understanding of Malinche that is taken for granted within Mexican and Chicano nationalism is fiction, not history.

In addition to being called la Chingada (“the fucked one”), Malinche is also referred to as la Vendida (“the sellout”), an accusation that has often been leveled at Chicana feminists and Chicana lesbians by Chicano nationalists. Malinche is, in a conventional understanding, the epitome of negative sexuality because of her status as Cortés’s lover and the mother of his mestizo children. Women whose behavior does not fit within the narrow scope of ideal Chicana

womanhood are malinchistas. The feminist move to reclaim Malinche as a potentially sympathetic character is made, largely, in response to the understanding of her that leads to her name's being used as an epithet directed at Chicanas who attempt to defy cultural norms (Alarcón, "Chicana's Feminist Literature" 188).

### **2.6.3 MALINCHE WAS FRAMED: MALINCHE AS FEMINIST CULTURAL ICON**

One of the complications of reclaiming Malinche is that freeing Malinche from the role of villainous traitor to her race requires reexamining the story nationalists tell themselves about the conquest. In the nationalist telling, Malinche is a traitor in a story about a powerful and violent colonial force overtaking a unified and harmless indigenous people. This is not the real story, of course. Historical records tell us that the pre-colonial period was one of war and conquest as larger and more powerful nations took over smaller ones. The main difference between the Aztec empire and the Spanish colonial powers was that the Aztec did not attempt to assimilate the people they conquered, but merely claimed their resources (and sometimes their people) in service of the empire. So, when Cortés and his soldiers appeared in Mexico, the indigenous people who had already been conquered by the Aztecs were perfectly willing to join this new army in an uprising against Moctezuma. Understanding this, Malinche looks no more like a traitor to her race than do the other indigenous people who seized the opportunity presented by the arrival of the Spanish and rose up against Moctezuma.



Removing from Malinche the weight of sole blame for the conquest of her people, we can look at the character of Malinche herself in greater detail. Born into nobility, Malinche would have been well-educated, and her ability to act as interpreter for the Spaniards tells us that she had facility with language, and likely some understanding of diplomacy. Prior to meeting Cortés, she had certainly not had an easy life, yet she was able to use her education and skills in her position as intermediary. She was a female slave who nonetheless figures prominently in the history of Greater Mexico. This is no small feat for anyone. We cannot know what her individual motivations for participation in the conquest were because the only records we have of her actions are given to us through written accounts by Spanish men and pictorial representations by indigenous men.

Without her account of the events, we can never be sure if Malinche was acting only in her own self-interest, simply playing the role of obedient slave, or doing what she thought was best for her people. Certainly, acting in her own interest would have been an understandable choice, given the fact that she had, to this point, been sold by her mother, given to Cortés, handed off to his friend, and given back to Cortés when her designated owner returned to Spain. Given her personal history, it would be a small wonder if she sought out any available opportunity to advance her station and secure her future. Alternately, she may have believed that helping Cortés meant helping her people. Initially, many of the indigenous people in the moment genuinely believed that Cortés's arrival was the completion of a prophecy about the return of Quetzalcoatl, the

snake god. Malinche may have felt that she was playing a necessary role in the completion of this prophecy. Even if she had understood that the Spanish were not acting benevolently towards her people, it is certainly unlikely that she could have foreseen the ultimate results of the conquest.

With a broader understanding of Malinche, Chicana feminists have endeavored to rescue her from the nationalist rhetoric of victimization and betrayal and construct instead a sympathetic woman who ensured the continuation of her people by mothering a new race and limiting the inevitable destruction wrought by Cortés and his soldiers and missionaries.

Contemporary feminist portrayals of Malinche have emphasized a recognition of Malinche as “a woman who had and made choices ... who deliberately chose to be a survivor ... who cast her lot with the Spaniards in order to ensure the survival of the race” (Rebolledo, 64). Historical accounts by Spanish soldiers and missionaries indicate that Malinche’s intervention saved Cortés’s life more than once; likewise her intervention saved the lives of many of the indigenous people through diplomacy. “It is in this capacity as intercessor (translator) and helper that La Malinche takes on the attributes of the Virgin of Guadalupe” (65). Figured as a heroic, intelligent woman whose actions prevented an even greater disaster from befalling the people of the Americas, Malinche becomes an icon with whom many Chicana feminists are happy to identify.

## **2.7 LA LLORONA: MOTHERHOOD AS MURDER**

### **2.7.1 GHOST STORIES AND THE USE-VALUE OF INFANTICIDE**

The background of the La Llorona (“The Weeping Woman”) story “is Aztec tradition dating from the sixteenth century and earlier” (Bierhorst, 143), and it retains an active presence in contemporary folklore. Post-conquest versions of the myth share a basic plot: a native-born woman, jilted in some way by the Spanish father of her children, murders her child(ren). When she realizes what she has done, she is driven mad by grief and remorse and takes her own life. But her spirit is trapped on Earth until she can retrieve the lost souls of her murdered children. So she persists as a ghost who wanders near bodies of water at night, weeping and wailing, “Ay! Mis hijos! (Alas, my children!)” La Llorona’s continued presence in the folklore of Greater Mexico can be attributed to her use-value as a warning against undesirable female behaviors. Children are warned that if they misbehave, La Llorona will come and take them; if they wander off at night, she will think they are her lost children and capture them. And, in some versions, she is a warning to men against following their lustful impulses; she appears from a distance as a young and beautiful woman, but when they get close, she reveals her monstrous appearance and kills them. In the folklore, she is a figure to be feared, not a figure to be sympathized with. And in many cases, she is conflated with or figured as an evolution of La Malinche – the young woman is native woman; her lover a

Spanish soldier who leaves her to return to Spain (and, presumably, his Christian wife). The parallels with the Medea myth we know from Euripides' play are unmistakable, of course – a fact that Cherrie Moraga relies on in her *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, which will be discussed at length in a later chapter. What is important about La Llorona for the purposes of this study, however, is the fact that she was a figure of myth before she became folklore; she was a goddess before she was a ghost. Her current manifestation in culture was constructed during the conquest by the Christian proponents who rejected the power of Nahua goddesses.

### **2.7.2 FROM MYTH TO FOLKLORE: WHY LLORONA IS AND IS NOT MALINCHE**

In one version of her story, La Llorona is equated with La Malinche. When Cortes tells her he is going to marry a Spanish princess and disown his son with Malinche, she kills the son and buries herself with him (Bierhorst 129). In fact, the conflation of Llorona with Malinche is commonplace, particularly given the aspects of the Llorona story that emphasize both her being betrayed by her lover and her betrayal of her children. The two characters share motherhood and loss, and are often grouped together as the antithesis of Guadalupe. Even Chicana feminists, in their efforts to dissect the virgin/puta dichotomy, place both Malinche and Llorona in the same character (Castellanos 148): a mother who is betrayed by a man and who loses, or fears the loss of, her children. Scholars of mythology and folklore, however, agree that Llorona's origins are

pre-conquest, so while some versions of her story tie her to Malinche, she cannot, historically-speaking, be Malinche.

In fact, the weeping mother figure appears in many variants within pre-conquest mythology. One of those variants gives Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* its title. The creation myth of the Hungry Woman tells of a spirit woman whose body was covered with mouths so that she cried out constantly for food. Unable to tolerate her constant crying, the gods sent her forth and created the world out of her body.

Then, to comfort the poor woman, they all flew down and began to make grass and flowers out of her skin. From her hair they made forests, from her eyes, pools and springs, from her shoulders, mountains, and from her nose, valley. At last she will be satisfied, they thought. But just as before, her mouths were everywhere, biting and moaning. And still she hasn't changed.

When it rains, she drinks. When flowers shrivel, when trees fall, or when someone dies, she eats. When people are sacrificed or killed in battle, she drinks their blood. Her mouths are always opening and snapping shut, but they are never filled. Sometimes at night, when the wind blows, you can hear her crying for food.

(Bierhorst 23-25)

Another variation on the creation myth has the Gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca bringing the Earth Goddess down from the heavens. She has a

hunger for the hearts of men, and cries out for blood. She can only be silenced through regular sacrifices.

The myth of La Llorona is to be found ... in the form of several old goddesses, among them the woman serpent, Cihuacóatl, who dates back to the time of the Toltecs; Xtabay among the Mayas; Quilaztli (a manifestation of Cihuacóatl) and Coatlicue among the Aztecs.

(Bierhorst, 25)

All of these characters are derivatives of the Earth Mother. All of them weep, many because of hunger and some because of loss. All are associated with both motherhood and death. Of all of these goddesses, the one whose presence in the oral traditions is most enduring is Cihuacóatl, the serpent woman.

In an essay entitled, “The Malinche-Llorona Dichotomy,” Luis Leal traces the demonization of Cihuacóatl in the Florentine Codex. Initially, Cihuacóatl is a goddess held in high esteem, particularly by mothers and mothers-to-be. Women in childbirth were encouraged to summon her strength and bravery to carry them through their ordeal. Later, she is figured as a spirit dressed in white, carrying a cradle on her back, who demands the sacrifice of children in order to satisfy her demonic hunger. To the Christian observer, the two figures—one who gives strength during childbirth; the other who demands the lives of children—could not be reconciled. In the Christian revision of Nahua mythology, Cihuacóatl became a demon like the rest of the Nahua deities; the temple became a house of the devil; and La Llorona became a threatening figure whose sole purpose was to frighten (Leal 135-137).

### **2.7.3 LLORONA IS A LIE: RECOUPING LA MADRE LOCA**

Speaking of the myth of La Llorona, Cherrie Moraga says,

The official version was a lie ... Who would kill their kid over some man dumping them? ... And yet everyone from Anaya to Euripides was telling us so. Well, if traición [treason] was the reason, could infanticide then be retaliation against misogyny, an act of vengeance not against one man, but man in general for a betrayal much graver than sexual infidelity: the enslavement and deformation of our sex? (Moraga Interview)

Like Moraga, other contemporary Chicana feminists have sought to reconstruct Llorona. In many cases, this reclamation of Llorona has relied on reaching back and reconnecting Llorona to her pre-Columbian roots in order to expose the lie of the “indigenous woman made insane by the betrayal of a Spanish lover” version of her story. Moraga imagines Llorona’s actions as a gesture of revenge on a cosmic scale. Others have simply called attention to the possibility that, like the goddesses of Nahua myth, Llorona’s actions are the outcome of a pursuit of balance in some form or another. Cihuacóatl provides strength during childbirth and claims sacrifices to maintain the safety and well-being of the people as a whole. Llorona must sacrifice her children for some greater good, and she grieves for the choice she has to make.

## 2.8 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the Chicano nationalist definition of motherhood includes a limited and limiting set of scenarios. These scenarios as they were deployed by the Chicano nationalist movement have been interpreted through the lenses of both Christianity and patriarchy, and have therefore borne little resemblance to the lived experience of motherhood for the contemporary Chicana. It has therefore been the project of Chicana feminists to reclaim these mothers and reconstitute their stories by exploring their roots in pre-conquest (and therefore pre-Christian) mythology and history. By tracing maternal archetypes to their mythical origins, Chicanas liberate the cultural understanding of motherhood. By focusing on indigenous mythology and on the role of the mother in particular, Chicanas maintain a connection with the Chicano nationalist movement, which values indigeneity and family as crucial components of the Chicano identity.

In the following chapters, I will explore the ways in which Chicana feminists' dialogue with and revisions of mythical motherhood played out on the stage in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In much the same way that the Chicano *Teatro* brought the rhetoric and activism of Chicano Nationalism to the stage, the theatrical work of Chicanas provided a performative outlet for Chicana feminists' concerns and activism. As Chicana feminists develop a new understanding of motherhood through explorations of mythology, their ways of presenting motherhood on stage reflect their developing consciousness.



### **3.0 CHAPTER 2: THE CHICANA MOTHER ON THE CHICANO STAGE AND THE EMERGENCE OF CHICANA THEATRE**

“You Mexicans are a bunch of hypocrites! You beat your women to a pulp, give them a trainload of kids, and then you turn them into saints!” - *La Familia Rasquache*, El Teatro Campesino, 1973

“Bronca, *¿por qué solo me quieren para cuidar a niños? ¿Porque soy mujer?* Why is it when it comes to childcare and child-rearing, automatically, men point at women and mothers?

The caring of lives is the task as well as the joy for both men and women.

*Carnales*, as responsible parents don't run away from this task! Embrace the knowledge of being or becoming a loving father.” - *Bronca*, Teatro de las Chicanas, 1973

### **3.1 *EL MOVIMIENTO, EL TEATRO, Y LA MADRE* (THE MOVEMENT, THE THEATRE, AND THE MOTHER)**

1965 was an eventful year. Malcolm X was assassinated. The US sent its first troops to Vietnam. Civil rights activists attempting to march from Selma to Montgomery were attacked by police on “Bloody Sunday.” The Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law. The primarily Mexican-American National Farmworkers Association, led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, voted to join the primarily-Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee led by Larry Itliong in the grape pickers’ strike. The two unions would jointly become the United Farmworkers (UFW). And in the grape fields of Delano, CA, Luis Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino (ETC). From this small, energetic theatrical experiment came the Chicano Theatre Movement (the *Teatro*<sup>1</sup>).

The *Teatro* may have begun in the grape fields of California, but it quickly became a much larger phenomenon and came to be understood as an artistic arm of the Chicano Nationalist movement. The *Teatro*’s close connection to Chicano Nationalism meant that it adopted the rhetoric and the worldview of cultural nationalism, including ideas about family, motherhood, and mythology. The limiting definitions of woman- and motherhood characteristic of Chicano Nationalism were perpetuated on the Chicano stage; women working in the *Teatro* felt obligated, initially, to accept and embody these definitions in order to participate in the movement.

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<sup>1</sup> The word “teatro” is used flexibly to refer to the Chicano Theatre movement as a whole as well as the individual groups creating theatre within the movement . To avoid confusion, I will capitalize the term when referring to the movement (“the *Teatro*”).

However, as was true of Chicanas working within the larger Chicano Nationalist Movement, Chicanas in the *Teatro* pushed back against the patriarchal power structure, pursuing paths to gender equality and seeking ways to bring Chicanas' issues into the conversation. In their burgeoning feminism, Chicanas struggled to find a social and political place that accommodated the fullness of the Chicana experience. On the border between Chicano Nationalism and Anglo Feminism, Chicanas were constantly pressured to choose one side or the other: be a part of the Chicano movement and accept the gender-based oppression inherent in that construct, or be a feminist and accept the loss of a sense of racial heritage. Chicanas were expected to be either/or, not both/and. "Since 'women's lib' was labeled a white, bourgeois invention, Chicana feminists who recognized gender as well as racial, cultural, and class oppression ran the risk of marginalization" (Yarbro-Bejarano, "The Female Subject" 390). A "true Chicana" was loyal to her race, even if it meant accepting a subordinate position to men.

This all-or-nothing mentality with regard to Chicanas and feminism was as evident in the *Teatro* as it was in the movement as a whole, and initially, Chicanas within *Teatro* accepted the limitation of performing the reproductive tropes of motherhood –playing out the Guadalupe/Malinche dichotomy in every female role available. This position became untenable very quickly, however, and by the early 1970s, Chicana teatristas began forming their own collectives and creating theatre that rejected the limitations of womanhood presented by the Guadalupe/Malinche dichotomy and instead embraced the full range of

Chicanas' experiences. In the early years, Chicanas mainly worked collectively, and their theatrical production largely took one of two forms: *actos* like those that had formed the foundation of the *Teatro*, but dealing with feminist ideas; or *teatropoesía*, a form that fused poetry, prose, and performance. These two tactics endured into the mid-1980s, at which point the combination of expanded training opportunities for Chicana playwrights and the decline of the *Teatro* movement shifted the dynamics of Chicana theatre towards more individual work. In order to trace the development of Chicana theatre as an outgrowth of and a response to the Chicano theatre, I will begin this chapter with a brief history of the Chicano theatre movement, starting with El Teatro Campesino as the most visible face of Chicano theatre in the 1960s and 1970s (and arguably still the most recognizable example of Chicano theatre in the US) and moving on to the movement as a whole. I will then discuss representations of mythical mothers on the Chicano stage. From there, I will examine in some depth the experience of Chicanas within the *Teatro* and their efforts to gain acceptance and equality as members of TENAZ (Teatro Nacional de Aztlán, the association of Chicano *teatro* companies) and participants in the *Teatro* tradition. As I will demonstrate, these early Chicana *teatristas* frequently placed motherhood among their primary points of contention, both on-stage and off.

## 3.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHICANO THEATRE

### 3.2.1 EL TEATRO CAMPESINO: A MOVEMENT BEGINS

Luis Valdez's founding of El Teatro Campesino in 1965 is commonly recognized as the starting point of the Chicano Theatre movement. Often, ETC and the Chicano Theatre Movement are used almost interchangeably in scholarship. This happens because ETC acted as the model on which most subsequent *teatros* were built. *Teatros* that followed ETC borrowed the forms it developed, the organizational structure it used, and the political tactics it employed (Copelin 73). So while ETC is not precisely equatable with the Chicano Theatre Movement as a whole, it represents the most obvious and recognizable example of the general trends and practices of the movement. The history of ETC is a contested one, and many later theatre historians have challenged the "great man" approach that designates Luis Valdez as founder of ETC and father of Chicano Theatre. ETC also finds itself the target of feminist critiques of the Chicano Theatre Movement most notably Yolanda Broyles-González's book-length study *El Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movement*, published in 1994.

ETC was founded with the goal of using theatre as a tool for political action in the context of the Farmworker's Labor Movement, led by Cesar Chávez. Initially, Valdez used the agit-prop techniques he had learned from working with the San Francisco Mime Troupe to develop improvisational *actos* that could be performed on the beds of trucks and improvised performance

spaces in the fields. The company of performers consisted of striking farm workers who, with Valdez's guidance, created *actos* to communicate the problems of Chicano farm workers. *Actos* were short, improvisational pieces designed to communicate political content while being entertaining to the audience (Ramírez 70). *Actos* were rooted in both the agit-prop and commedia dell'arte traditions; they featured few props or sets, a strong sense of good versus evil, and exaggerated physical and verbal comedy. The *acto*, which became a primary feature of early Chicano theatre, was an effective form, given the facts that the farmworkers had a very low literacy rate and many spoke little or no English. Through *actos*, the performers could deliver a message while getting a laugh; they were enormously successful as a device for enabling the talented but untrained company members to perform effective theatre. So great was the success of the company's approach that they grew into a touring collective of theatre artists (Ramírez 79).

While ETC's original mode of operating was productive and successful for both the union and the *teatro*, the symbiotic relationship did not last long. César Chávez's focus was on non-violent protest, and the UFW was not a specifically Chicano union; Valdez and ETC had become more interested in Chicano Nationalism, which was not bound by Chávez's commitment to nonviolence and inclusivity. The success of Valdez's work with the UFW, combined with his developing commitment to Chicano Nationalism, led ETC to part from its union organizing roots and direct its efforts toward the growing Chicano Nationalist Movement in 1967. As the company developed, and the

participants became more experienced as makers of theatre, Valdez began experimenting with different forms, including the *mito*, a more serious, longer, play based on religion, ritual, and/or mythology, and the *corrido*, a ballad play that used familiar Mexican folk music with new lyrics to frame the story (Copelin 74).

The company set up shop in San Juan Bautista, CA, in 1971, the same year it published the first collection of *Actos*. In his “Notes on the Chicano Theatre,” Valdez laid out his expectations for the *Teatro*:

1. Chicanos must be seen as a nation with geographic, religious, cultural and racial roots in Aztlán. Teatros must further the idea of nationalism, and create a national theatre based on identification with the Amerindian past.
2. The organizational support of the national theatre would be from within, for "the corazón de la Raza (the heart of our people) cannot be revolutionized on a grant from Uncle Sam."
3. Most important and valuable of all was that "the *teatros* must never get away from La Raza ... If the Raza will not come to the theatre, then the theatre must go to the Raza. This, in the long run, will determine the shape, style, content, spirit, and form of el teatro chicano."

(Quoted in Kastellanos, “Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Post-War to Present” 199)

Through the 1970s and 1980s, ETC toured regionally, nationally, and even internationally. With the success of *Zoot Suit* at the end of the 1970s, Valdez began to push the company in a more commercial direction, creating Chicano theatre that appealed to middle-class white audiences. He justified this shift by pointing out that the work of the financially-struggling *teatro* had to be funded. ETC still operates today out of its home in San Juan Bautista.

### **3.2.2 THE *TEATRO* MOVEMENT BEYOND EL *TEATRO* CAMPESINO: STUDENTS, COLLECTIVES, TENAZ**

The work being done by ETC in the late 1960s and 1970s was politically engaging, dynamic, and effective. The combination of the company's touring and the publication of *Actos* bolstered the developing *Teatro* movement. As Chicana/os saw ETC's work and its impact, other theatre collectives began to form, building on the work of ETC. The movement had begun in force. Its goals were, essentially:

To create an alternative to the dominant mode of production of mainstream theatre, to make theatre accessible to a working-class Chicano audience, to validate forms of working-class Chicano culture, and to create accurate theatrical representation of Chicanos' historical and social experience. (Yarbro-Bejarano, "The Female Subject" 389)

The improvisational and agit-prop nature of the work ETC was doing supported these goals by enabling individuals with little or no prior experience in the theatre to participate in the creation and production work of the *teatro*. Like



the post-Revolutionary Russian Blue Blouse troupes, Chicano/a theatre companies formed in communities, on college campuses, and in workplaces. Chicanos with shared experience, shared vision, and/or shared concern gathered to create theatre that spoke to their experience. As more and more companies began to appear, the need for a way of sharing experience and training became evident. Several *teatro* leaders got together and formed a network, called Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (TENAZ). The goals of TENAZ were to:

- 1) establish communication between *teatros*;
- 2) provide a means for sharing materials, i.e., *actos*, songs, etc.;
- and
- 3) establish a summer workshop for representatives from as many *teatros* as possible.

(Huerta, "Concerning Teatro Chicano" 1973)

The *teatros* participating in TENAZ held a festival annually, beginning in the summer of 1971 at San Juan Bautista, with a different company playing host to the festival each year. These festivals included workshops, community meetings to set policy and goals for the organization, as well as performances by member companies. At its height, there were more than 25 companies participating in TENAZ at a time.

While the performance methods and forms were shared among the various *teatros*, not all *teatros* were specifically invested in Chicano Nationalism in the way that ETC was. In spite of differences in approach, the

*teatros* continued to acknowledge a shared goal of educating and agitating the Chicana/o to pursue social changes.

### **3.3 WOMEN IN *TEATRO*: *MACHISMO*, *FAMILIA*, AND FEMINISM**

The *Teatro* movement was momentarily successful in terms of providing an artistic outlet for Chicano nationalism and enabling students and theatre artists to explore and present Chicano identity construction. Chicanas in the early *Teatro* struggled, however, both with the patriarchal structure of the movement itself and with the construction of womanhood on the Chicano stage. Men were in charge of the *teatros*, and men therefore determined both the content of the plays and how gender roles were expressed through them.

In the context of the Chicano Nationalist Movement, women's issues were not seen as significant except as they related to the movement's goals and ideals. In the movement and the *Teatro*, *la Raza* (the race) and *la familia* (the family) took center stage. The man was the public force, responsible for protesting and working against the negative impacts of white America on the Chicano. The woman was the mother and the home, responsible for raising good Chicano boys in order to continue the struggle.

The male-run *teatros* reproduced and reinscribed the values and assumptions of Chicano nationalism, including the valorization of *machismo*, the centrality of family, and the limitations of womanhood. These assumptions led to a theatre that either placed women in supporting roles or positioned

them as obstacles to the success of male protagonists. At the time of the Chicano Nationalist Movement, however, women's liberation was also a feature of the national conversation, and not all Chicanas were willing to sit quietly and perform the role of passive mother. Instead, Chicanas began challenging the narrow definitions of motherhood being provided to them within the movement as a whole. This rejection of the rhetoric of motherhood carried over quickly into the arts, including the *Teatro*.

Chicana feminists and scholars argue that female roles in the early years of the *Teatro* were almost exclusively limited to a simple dichotomy: Virgin or Whore. This dichotomy manifests in the plays through direct and indirect allusions to the archetypes of the Virgin of Guadalupe as Virgin and Malinche as Whore. Looking back on the early years of El Teatro Campesino, Socorro Valdez commented that the roles available for women were essentially limited to "*la mama, la novia, la abuela, or la hermana*" (the mother, the bride/girlfriend, the grandmother, or the sister). "The way those female roles were laid out are for the most part very passive and laid back, *y lo aguantaban todo* (they put up with everything)" (quoted in Marrero, "From El Teatro" 49). Yolanda Broyles-González adds to Valdez's assessment of the characters available in the plays of ETC, pointing out that "women are first of all defined in a familial category ... [then] divided into one of two sexual categories: whores or virgins" (quoted in Quintana 95). Women in the plays of ETC are almost exclusively limited to reproductions of the *tres madres*. Even characters who

are not mothers contain in their construction allusions to Guadalupe, Llorona, or Malinche.

Yvonne Broyles-Gonzalez points out in *El Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movement* that,

throughout the course of El Teatro Campesino's dramatic evolutionary process, the female roles have remained fairly constant in all the genres: all women are ... assigned one of two sexual categories: whores or virgins ... women fall into only one of two categories: good woman or bad woman. (135)

Some of the female members of Luis Valdez's company objected to the limited characterizations available for women, but initially felt that their options for addressing the issue were limited. They viewed the work they were doing as important to the Chicano movement and were not willing to leave the *Teatro* simply because of gender inequality within the movement.

A former company member of El Teatro Campesino, who later became co-director of the Mark Taper Forum, Diane Rodriguez has stated that she does not place blame on or feel victimized by Luis Valdez. Admitting that women's roles were not ideal and that women did not have the same kinds of authority and opportunity as men, Rodriguez balances the critique with a comment that the women of the organization at the time had the freedom to leave or to speak up in their own defense more vehemently. She points out that they remained largely silent because they believed that the larger cause of Chicano liberation was more important than gender politics (Rodriguez 316).

Not all companies adhered to the traditional, patriarchal leadership structure modeled by ETC. El Teatro de la Esperanza (ETE), for example, sought a more egalitarian structure. ETE, founded by Jorge Huerta and a group of students from University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) in 1972, took a materialist approach rather than a cultural nationalist one. This was reflected in both their theatre and their organizational practices. Part of this approach led them to attempt to address some of the concerns of Chicanas within the *teatros*. This effort included both organizational considerations and artistic ones.

ETE made extensive efforts to allow for gender equality in its organizational structure.

El Teatro de la Esperanza's efforts to distribute power within the group among both men and women involved not only decision-making, but also directing, collective creation, administration, and all aspects of production. They were sensitive to women's issues, being the only member group of TENAZ to institute child care as part of their policy. (Yarbro-Bejarano, "The Female Subject" 398)

Aware of the friction within the Chicano movement with regard to gender, ETE attempted to subvert the notion of the passive Chicana that had become the default presentation in Chicano Theatre. Their plays framed Chicana mothers as activists and wise truth-tellers for the men in the plays. While this was a welcome shift from the male-centric work of ETC for Chicanas, the work of ETE

did not generally challenge the position of the Chicana as mother and center of la familia.

Apart from ETE, few of the male-run *teatros* placed any emphasis on the question of gender, focusing instead on the economic and cultural issues of the Chicano. Chicanas therefore needed to seek theatrical outlets for their unique experience outside of the male-run *teatros*—a subject to be taken up in subsequent chapters.

### **3.4 MOTHERHOOD ON THE CHICANO STAGE**

It is possible to look at almost any of ETC's early plays to find specific examples of the deployment of archetypical motherhood. Elder mothers are frequently depicted as Guadalupe figures; they are patient and passive, offering love and support without criticism or resistance. In some cases, Guadalupe herself appears in the plays. Wives, however, are often depicted as Malinches, as are most single women. They are critical and scheming, advocates for assimilation or at least cooperation with white culture. Malinches are sell-outs, sometimes literally.

The Malinche archetype in ETC's work is nowhere clearer than in the character of Miss Jiminez in the 1967 *acto Los Vendidos*. To begin with, the play's title is an allusion to Malinche; la vendida – the sell-out – is among the epithets that have been leveled against Malinche and against Chicana feminists. Yolanda Broyles-Gonzales argues,

This *acto* replicates the male colonial ideology that created the term ‘malinchismo’; that term and that ideology assign historical responsibility for ‘selling out’ (or collaborating with the enemy) to female subjects. (*El Teatro Campesino* 136)

In this particular *acto*, Miss Jiminez, the only female character, arrives at “Honest Sancho’s Used Mexican Lot and Mexican Curio Shop” in search of a “good Mexican” to bolster the conservative agenda of then-California governor Ronald Reagan. The owner provides her with several options to choose from – each exemplifying a stereotype of Mexican-ness; Sancho introduces her to the worker, the Pachucho, the revolutionary, and the Mexican-American. From the outset, Miss Jiminez’s rejection of her Mexican-ness is evident. She introduces herself as Miss JIM-in-ez; the Anglicization of her last name signals her intent to separate herself from her Mexican roots and to assimilate with white culture. In addition, her stated purpose demeans her heritage and her people for the sake of her own self-interest.

From the available Mexicans, Miss Jiminez chooses the Mexican-American, a model of her own assimilation. The Mexican-American is a robotic imitation of the “token Mexican” desired by the conservative agenda. He speaks without an accent, criticizes Mexicans according to the party line, and even comes in various shades of brown. His movements are controlled, his words prescribed. Given all of this, it at first appears that the Mexican-American is yet another sell-out to White America. But unlike Miss Jiminez, the male Mexican-American is a revolutionary pretending to be a sell-out. Once Miss

Jiminez has paid the requested \$15,000 for him, he suddenly begins shouting, “¡Viva la raza! ¡Viva la huelga! ¡Viva la revolución!” He then “wakes” the other models up, encouraging them to join in his protest. Rather than being moved to action like the others, Miss Jiminez runs away, leaving the “robots” – who are not robots – to divide the money among themselves. As a final twist, we learn that Honest Sancho is actually the robot. Miss Jiminez is the only human sell-out in the play. Like the traditionally-imagined Malinche, she has sold out her race and aligned herself with white culture, despite the fact that white culture does nothing for her. Unlike the traditionally-imagined Malinche, Miss Jiminez is not a mother. Her status as a single woman, in this case, emphasizes her rejection of her own culture and her position as a sell-out. Her characterization reflects anxieties of Chicano nationalism about Chicana feminists, who were perceived to be allying themselves with white culture.

The *acto* format uses broad characterizations and clear divisions of “good guys” and “bad guys.” The “bad guys” in the early *actos* were almost exclusively the white bosses. *Los Vendidos* is notable in its presentation of a Mexican-American character as the “bad guy.” Miss Jiminez is the character to be ridiculed and hated because, in spite of her Mexican heritage, she has made herself a representative of white culture. By equating her with Malinche, Valdez turns her into an object of hatred and rejection for his audience. Instead of acknowledging the possible struggle of Malinche in her historical context, or the struggle of the Chicana in a contemporary context, Valdez embraces the construction of Malinche as *vendida* and positions her as the villain in his play.



Aimee Carillo Rowe comments, “Malintzín [Malinche] must be sacrificed to the play’s Chicano nationalist message ... the play sells the story of La Vendida in order to advance its Chicano nationalist critique of the Chicana’s vexed placement within U.S. national belonging” (123). Not only does Valdez position Miss Jiminez as Malinche, but he manages also to remove any real agency from her character. Even in her capacity as antagonist, Miss Jiminez is positioned as an accessory to a male (Ronald Reagan in this case), rather than as an independent actor.

The 1970 *mito* by Luis Valdez, *Bernabé*, provides another opportunity to see the maternal archetypes at work. Bernabé is a 35-year-old mentally-retarded Chicano farmworker who is in love with La Tierra (the Earth). The play is divided into two worlds: earthly and spiritual. In his everyday reality, Bernabé lives with a domineering, exploitative mother who views it as her right to use and abuse her son as she chooses, in spite of his adulthood. Her self-interest at the cost of her son’s wellbeing positions her as a Malinche – pursuing her own betterment at the cost of her countrymen. The other woman Bernabé interacts with in the earthly realm is a prostitute who is foisted on him by his well-intentioned cousin. The hyper-sexuality of the prostitute presents another side of the Malinche archetype—*la chingada*. In the spiritual realm, however, Bernabé’s love interest is La Tierra, a virginal, self-sacrificing feminine force who operates firmly within the realm of male dominance. Her father is El Sol, her brother La Luna, and these male forces determine the outcome of her relationship with Bernabé. It is up to La Tierra’s father to

decide if Bernabé is a good enough person to marry her, and her virginity is emphasized in contrast to the hyper-sexuality of the prostitute.

In the end there is no positive image of a woman, because La Tierra marries him, embraces him and buries him ... But La Tierra is not a woman. In the end, women are absent from this beautiful play except as a guilt-inflicting, exploitative and oppressive mother, a prostitute, and an allegory of land, which means power. (Melville 73)

The play demonstrates a conventional deployment of the virgin/whore dichotomy: the women in Bernabé's life are examples of the ruined mother and can only damage him; the pure spirit of La Tierra, the play's representative of a Guadalupean mother figure, is the only one who truly loves him, and he can only be with her in his death.

The final play I will look at is Valdez's 1973 *corrido*, *La Familia Rasquache*. This musically-driven play represents an early version of what eventually became *La Gran Carpa de Los Rasquachis*. The play opens with the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth before shifting into the story of the Jesus Rasquache and, after his death, the story of his sons. The play traces Jesus's life, beginning with his departure from Mexico in order to become a farmworker in the US through his marriage and eventual death as a disabled 47-year-old, and traces his legacy in the lives of his adult sons. In addition to the characters of Jesus and his family, El Diablo (the Devil) and La Calavera (the Skeleton, Death) figure prominently, performing in a variety of roles to represent the

forces working against Jesus's success: "*el patron*" (the boss/the rich); "*el patroncito*" (the manager/the middle class); a social worker; and even the love interest for both of Jesus's sons. The play highlights the forces at work against the Mexican immigrant farmworker and the ways in which he accepts and embodies the role prescribed for him by white culture, rather than seeking a better way. In the second half of the play, Jesus's children are not farmworkers, but they accept and embody other Mexican-American stereotypes. One earns his way through drugs and prostitution; the other uses his people to win an election, then rejects his people in order to keep political power.

Like other ETC plays, *La Familia Rasquachi* is performed playfully and presentationally, with an emphasis on its political humor; its action driven by music and dance as much as by plot. Its message is delivered in broad strokes, and all of the characters are, to some extent, caricatures of themselves, but the play's focus is on the struggle of the Chicano in the face of pressures from both the white Bosses and the woman and children in his life.

As is typical in ETC's work, the female characters in the play are primarily accessories in the male protagonist's story. Jesus's wife exists to produce and raise children and to remind Jesus of his duty to provide for his family. The two most prominent female presences in the play are the Virgin Mary and the sons' "love interest," who is, in fact, El Diablo. The Virgin appears periodically throughout the play at moments when one of the male protagonists is on the verge of making a destructive decision, to remind him of his moral

center. She is dressed in white with a sparkling blue mantle (as compared to the very earthy attire of the other characters), and she speaks in a light, patient voice, gently pleading. Her appearance and her action are in direct opposition to the action of El Diablo who, in the second half of the play, controls the action of Jesus's sons in the form of a girlfriend-and-then-wife. The girlfriend, played by a woman wearing the Diablo mask, encourages one son to exploit his people by selling drugs to them and encourages the other to exploit them by gaining their votes and refusing to serve them from political office. As is true in *Los Vendidos*, the only character as evil as the white bosses, the girlfriend, is a stand-in for Malinche, and as is true in *Bernabé*, the only character who can bring redemption is the Virgin who exists only in spirit, never in flesh.

These three works from El Teatro Campesino highlight the spectrum of both the company's and Chicano nationalism's thinking (or not thinking) about the Chicana, femininity, and motherhood. In *La Familia Rasquachi* and *Bernabé*, the deployment of female characters demonstrates an assumption that the place and function of women simply is what it is. There is something like thoughtlessness in the construction of female characters, whose sole purpose in the play is to provide a background of relationships for the male protagonists and act as sources of support or temptation. This traditional and uncomplicated presentation of women's place in relation to men demonstrates the lack of attention to women's issues that was characteristic of the movement and the *Teatro* at the time. The key difference between the two works' presentations of women can be attributed to form – the characters in the

*corrido* are broad and colorful in keeping with the form, while the characters in the *mito* are mythical and metaphorical. In *Los Vendedos*, however, the female character's construction is far more specific. She has a far larger role than in the other plays, and she does not function in support of or as temptation for the male characters in the play. Rather, Miss Jiminez appears to be a cautionary character – a warning to both the Chicano and the Chicana of the dangers of women's independence and assimilation. This deployment reflects both anxieties about Chicana feminism and the typical function of the *acto*—as a broad, political sketch with a pointed message.

### **3.5 FROM CHICANAS IN *TEATRO* TO *TEATRO CHICANA*: PATHS TO EMPOWERMENT**

Perhaps the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture. Her task is to show how in works by Chicanas, elements of gender, race, culture and class coalesce ... By asserting herself as Chicana or *mestiza*, the Chicana confronts the damaging fragmentation of her identity into component parts at war with each other.(Yarbro-Bejarano, "Chicana Literature" 214)

From very early in the life of the Chicano theatre movement, women began to raise the question of Chicana representation and participation. During the 1970s, Chicanas began to examine their place in the larger Chicano Movement (Ramírez 81) and within the theatre that was a part of the movement. An observer at the 1973 Festival de los Teatros Chicanos noted “the problem of the Chicana liberation drive surfaced in the discussions and workshops of the festival” (Copelin 75). In part, the “Chicana liberation drive” emerged because of the external influence of the women’s liberation movement active in the United States at the time, but Alma Garcia argues that “The Chicana feminist movement emerged primarily as a result of the dynamics within the Chicano movement” (García, Alma 218). It was also a product of the increasing politicization of the Chicano/a community as a whole. As Chicanas in the theatre movement devoted time and energy to addressing questions of inequality based on economic and racial factors, they came to question the traditional inequality based on sex that was a part of their culture. As Chicanas began to speak out against their subordination, they were accused of being malinchistas, attempting to undermine La Causa – of being duped into placing white, middle-class feminist values ahead of the nationalist agenda of the Chicano movement and rejecting their own cultural heritage (Dicochea 80). The challenge for Chicanas in the early years of the movement was that they were learning how to be activists while being told that activism was not theirs to do – that they were mothers first and foremost, and all they did must be secondary to their role as reproducer of the race.

Because of the close ties between the *Teatro* and the Chicano Nationalist Movement, the strategies and revolutionary rhetoric of the two were closely intertwined, and what impacted one impacted the other. Such was the case with Chicana feminism. Its emergence within *el movimiento* and within the *Teatro* happened almost simultaneously, and the efforts, successes, and challenges of Chicana feminists within the movement as a whole were often reflected in the efforts of Chicana feminists within the theatre. Chicana teatristas struggled to carve out a space for their point of view and their concerns.

In addition to ideological resistance from Chicano nationalism, the emergent Chicana theatre suffered from a vexing lack of Chicana playwrights. In the early 1970s, in spite of (and in response to) the lack of trained dramatists among them, Chicanas in California set out on two distinct paths to creating Chicana theatre, almost simultaneously. On one path were Chicanas who decided to adopt the existing forms being used with success by the Chicano *teatros* and to infuse those forms with themes and ideas important to Chicanas. On the other path were Chicanas who sought to create a theatrical form that took advantage of the poetry and prose being written by Chicana feminists. These paths were not, as we will see, entirely divergent. Both approaches had successes and failures, and ultimately, Chicana theatre as it currently exists can be seen as an outgrowth of both the adoption of existing forms and the fusion of performance and poetry.

### 3.5.1 THE CHICANA THEATRE COLLECTIVE

Initially, rather than attempting to segregate themselves entirely from the *Teatro*, Chicana feminists strove to challenge sexual inequality from within the established parameters of the Chicano theatre movement. Early attempts by Chicanas to create feminist theatre were frequently criticized for being too damning of the Chicano male and were therefore discredited (Pottlitzer 15). Within the Chicano theatre movement (and within the Mexican American Civil Rights movement as a whole), Chicana feminists struggled to find a way to integrate the nationalist and feminist impulses. Still, Chicana teatristas made progress in many of the same ways that Chicanas in the nationalist movement did – slowly and with persistent effort.

Key to Chicanas' efforts at gender equality, particularly in the early years, was the ability to couch criticisms about gender issues in an expression of solidarity with men. One of the tactics for accomplishing this has been to present the Chicana's experience in opposition to that of the white woman. Another has been to emphasize the Chicana's connection to the indigenous.

In 1978, a women's caucus formed within TENAZ (Teatro Nazionale de Aztlan, the organization to which most *teatros* belonged). The caucus naming itself Women in Teatro (W.I.T.) suggested policy to the larger organization (including such things as establishing childcare programs to enable women to participate more widely), "provided a much-needed communication network" for the female members of various *teatros*, and "raised consciousness around women's issues and helped women just beginning to work in *Teatro* to deal



with their specific problems” (Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Female Subject” 396).

Still, the *Teatro* movement as a whole was doing little to pursue gender equality either administratively or artistically. The leadership of individual companies continued to be primarily male, and plays continued to reinscribe the trope of women as either Guadalupes, Lloronas, or Malinches.

As individual companies proved either absent or unproductive instruments to change the *Teatro* from within, some Chicanas began to focus on creating theatre of their own, in woman-run and woman-only collectives. As was true of most of the movement’s collectives, women’s collectives faced operational challenges related to funding, performance logistics, and even personalities; some collectives assembled exclusively for one production, and some intended to persevere, but managed only one or two productions before disbanding; some collectives changed names and missions repeatedly; some functioned more as support groups than as *teatros*. In spite of their obstacles, however, the collectives managed to bring the question of gender equality into the artistic work of the *Teatro* and to challenge existing formations of Chicana motherhood on the stage.

Many of the Chicanas who created or joined Chicana theatre collectives came to those collectives with experience in either the *Teatro* movement or MEChA, and had developed both organizing skills and a frustration with gender inequality from those experiences. Laura Garcia, one of the founding members of Teatro de las Chicanas, recounts her decision to leave Teatro Mestizo and join Teatro de las Chicanas:

... as good as the *actos* we performed in Teatro Mestizo were, they still portrayed women in the traditional roles ... So when Felicitas approached Lupe and me to join the Teatro de las Chicanas, neither of us hesitated. The idea of an all-Chicana theater group to deal with the *machismo* we encountered and assert our place in the social revolution caught on like prairie fire. (García, Gutiérrez, and Núñez 33)

In the context of woman-run and woman-only collectives, Chicanas found that they could bypass issues like gendered division of labor and could feel safe and secure in expressing their political and personal ideas to the group. Rather than beginning from an assumption that men were in charge and a woman had to “earn” the right to hold a leadership position, all members began on equal footing. This foundation enabled collectives to develop their work with a shared sense of exploration and ownership of the work.

### **3.5.2 TEATRO DE LAS CHICANAS: FUSING FEMINISM AND *TEATRO***

In 1971, the newly-formed Teatro de las Chicanas performed their first play: *Chicana Goes to College*. Conceived and executed as a way for company members to communicate their experience and their burgeoning feminism to their mothers, this play is an example of Chicana theatre artists’ early grappling with the staging of traditional definitions of woman- and motherhood, as well as the lived experience of being a Chicana in the midst of the Chicano Nationalist movement. Because Chicana theatre artists tended to be young

women whose radical politics contrasted with their mothers' traditional views, the mother/daughter relationship loomed large in both their lives and their work at the time.

The original members of Teatro de las Chicanas were students at San Diego State University. Few of them had any theatrical experience, but they were familiar with the work being done by male-run *teatros*. Many had seen the effectiveness of Luis Valdez's *actos* as political tools, so their first impulses were to use the tools they had seen working in other contexts. In recounting the early years of the company, the members emphasize their lack of knowledge about the technical aspects of play-making and ensemble-building. "None of us had any idea what it took to produce an *acto*, or play," Delia Ravelo recounts (García, Gutiérrez, and Núñez 11). The life of their collective was a continual learning experience as they attempted to create a theatre that was uniquely Chicana. They opted to do collectively-created plays, improvisational performances, and adaptations of existing plays, always focused on highlighting their unique position as women and mothers within the Chicano movement.

*Chicana Goes to College* is first and foremost an attempt to highlight the importance of Chicana feminism. While the play itself does not emphasize the mother/daughter relationship, the context of its performance highlights one of the ways in which mythical mother figures are deployed by Chicana feminists in order to bridge the divide between their point of view and that of their more traditional family members.

Significantly, *Chicana Goes to College* focuses heavily on the virgin/whore dichotomy, including its Guadalupe/Malinche aspect. Like the *actos* of ETC, *Chicana Goes to College* uses the rhetoric of the opposition against itself in order to highlight their alternative viewpoint. Because all roles in the play were performed by women in the company, the male characters become exaggerated macho types, and the condescending white professor is caricatured as well, while the Chicanas in the play are portrayed with simplicity and sympathy. Where *Los Vendidos* sets the Chicana as the antagonist and the Chicano as the protagonist, *Chicana Goes to College* inverts this arrangement.

In the first part of the play, Lucy, the protagonist, is focused on her desire to go to college, while her boyfriend is focused on bedding and wedding her. The male assumption, even when informed to the contrary, is that the Chicana thinks only of marriage and motherhood. When Lucy informs her parents that she wants to go to college, her father responds, "Except for girls who become nuns, all females who leave their home to go to school become whores!" (García, Gutiérrez, and Núñez 177) Education in this context equates to rejection of traditional values and a transition from the Virginal Guadalupe to the whorish Malinche. Lucy's parents express more anxiety and disapproval at the prospect of her going to college than they do at the prospect of her being pregnant, encouraging her instead to marry the boyfriend they had earlier disapproved of.

Later in the play, in a reflection of La Malinche's disgrace, Lucy's close friend Chona is raped by one of the Chicano students, only to be taken in and comforted by the self-sacrificing Lucy. The linkage of Lucy to Guadalupe is completed at the end of the play, when Lucy reveals that the broken broach she treasures "has a story like [her mother's] necklace of La Virgen de Guadalupe. The name of the female image on the broach is Artemis. She is a link to an ancient 'Sweet Virgin'" (García, Gutiérrez, and Núñez 189).

The protagonist of the play is an analog for Guadalupe, in spite of her father's warning that she'll become a whore if she goes to college. Her best friend is a sympathetic analog for Malinche; her flirting and her heavy makeup both mark her, to the traditional Chicano, as "whore." But instead of willingly giving her body, she is violated by a man who believes sex to be his right. This early *acto*, created by a group of young, inexperienced college students, set the stage for much of the Chicana drama that followed. Because their intended audience for this *acto* was their mothers, whom they hoped would support their burgeoning feminism, the women of the company created a play that focused more on the struggle of the young Chicana than on the complete rejection of traditional norms of behavior.

Even though the play did not aggressively challenge social norms, it still portrayed its creators' desire to change the way Chicanas were perceived by both their peers and their parents. The women of the company feared the content and presentation of their *acto* would be too radical for their mothers, whom they perceived as traditional. Instead, the event had the desired effect of

creating a dialogue between the women and their mothers about the experiences they were having as first-generation college students. Felicitas Nuñez writes,

We were having fun, but we were worried about the trauma to our mothers in witnessing our raw, naked stand against male supremacy. Our darling traditional mothers somehow managed to laugh with our performance, and still my mother tugged my arm with her strong hand and said, ‘Como eres bocona’ (You have a big mouth). Then she broke into a smile, and I swelled with pride.

(García, Gutiérrez, and Núñez\_140-141)

The deployment and contesting of easily-recognizable archetypal mothers help the radical daughters make clear the challenges they face in this new environment and create a bridge between mothers and daughters.

In much the same way as Chicana feminists encountered resistance and hostility from the leaders of the Chicano nationalist movement, Teatro de Las Chicanas encountered early resistance and hostility from male-run *teatros* and TENAZ. In their recuerdos (recollections), many of the company members discuss the 1975 TENAZ festival. They had prepared an adaptation of Brecht’s *The Mother* for performance at the festival. “Unfortunately, we had put in our application to participate late. Usually, every *teatro* group that had applied ... was accommodated,” recalls Virginia Rodriguez Balanoff (García, Gutiérrez, and Núñez 67). Without a response from the organization about whether or not their application had been accepted, the company members travelled to the

conference, “confident that we could pull through with our play” (67). Once they arrived, however, they were prevented from performing, in spite of the monumental effort they had gone through in order get to the festival and to prepare the play for performance.

The work of Teatro de las Chicanas focused on utilizing the *acto* form and adapting existing plays and movies to highlight the Chicana experience. Their work consistently emphasized the role of the mother as central while challenging the notion that a “good mother” is passive and selfless like Guadalupe. The company changed its name to Teatro Laboral in 1975 to reflect its ideological shift toward union organizing. That year, in addition to preparing their adaptation of *The Mother*, they performed an adaptation of the blacklisted 1954 movie *Salt of the Earth*, in which the wives of striking New Mexico miners strike on their husbands’ behalf, converting even the most macho of the husbands to embrace gender equality. Both plays positioned motherhood as an impetus for action rather than passivity, and both placed the mother as protector of the race in the face of economic oppression.

### **3.5.3 TEATROPOESÍA – MOTHERHOOD AS FORM AND CONTENT**

I’ll tell you what my dream is ... My dream is to be able to do a theatre piece on the phases of womanhood ... I want to put womanhood into every form that I can express: in singing, in crying, in laughing, everything ... Women are obviously in a type of great void. They are balanced, but in terms of the way the work

looks at us they've put us in this position where we've accepted the condition of doing one role instead of many. If there were some way of taking that and putting it into words that are theatrical, I would like to do that. I don't believe a man is going to write that.(Qtd in Broyles-González, "Women in El Teatro" 162)

This passage, spoken by Socorro Valdez in a 1983 interview with Yolanda Broyles-González, establishes a clear trajectory for Chicana feminist drama – to communicate the phases of womanhood in a theatrical way. Valdez asks that the journey of a woman's life be put "into words that are theatrical." The question then becomes, "Which words qualify as theatrical?" In the decade before Socorro Valdez asked for a theatrical presentation of womanhood, collectives of women performing *teatropoesía* had begun moving towards this goal (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, *Stages of Life* 58). To be certain, these efforts were not unconditionally successful. As Valdez concedes, the work of recreating the phases of womanhood – the dimensions of womanhood – is not simple. Chicana women had to shed the inscription of centuries of subordination in order to emerge with a fully-defined theatrical presentation of the many facets of womanhood. Nevertheless, attempts were being made (70).

As an alternative to simply taking the operational and artistic work of the male-run *teatros* and applying it to feminism (or applying feminism to it), as did companies like *Teatro de las Chicanas*, some early women's collectives and Chicana performance artists, in response to their lack of training as playwrights, explored *teatropoesía* as a form for performing the Chicana voice.



In this form, Chicanas performed poetry and prose written by themselves and/or other Chicana writers. This new form helped Chicana writers bridge the gap between the private forms of poetry and prose and the public form of drama, and gave new energy to efforts to portray the Chicana mother positively on stage. The performance of poetry was not entirely a novel idea, and historically, it's likely that at least some of the Chicanas creating *teatropoesía* in the San Francisco Bay Area were in contact with Ntozake Shange, who was working on her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* at Berkeley in 1974 (Smethurst 286). However, unlike Shange, who was working in conversation with the work of other African American women dramatists, Chicana *teatropoetas* were defining a new theatrical space for themselves in the context of a near-complete lack of training or experience. They were not challenging the existing forms, but rather attempting to find a form that could accommodate both their skills and their experience. The 1980s and 1990s saw a steady increase in the number of Chicana playwrights, a trend that has largely continued in the new millennium.

According to Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, *teatropoesía* performances, in which women performed poetry written by themselves or by other women, became popular in the southwest in the 1970s ("*Teatropoesía*" 78). *Teatropoesía* seems to have marked the first consistent effort in Chicana drama to separate the artistic work and unique voices of Chicanas from the established modes of the Chicano theatre movement. It represented the first

form of performance that could be claimed by Chicanas as their own, rather than borrowed from the legacy of the larger Chicano Movement. It is a tremendous challenge to unearth scholarship on the works of Chicana playwrights in the period between the founding of El Teatro Campesino and the emergence of *teatropoesía*, a fact which supports the positioning of *teatropoesía* as a first full step away from the male-centered Chicano theatre movement and as the launching point for contemporary Chicana drama.

Early in the 1970s, groups of Chicana theatre artists began to experiment with this new form for feminist drama. They took existing poems by other Chicanas and placed them in a performative context. In this way, they found a way to bridge the gap between the private (poetry) and the public (theatre) and reject the narrative of subjugation passed down through the phallogocentric narrative of the Chicano theatre movement (Neate, 197). “[I]t is not surprising that writing that explores the Chicana-as-subject is often accompanied by formal and linguistic innovation” (Yarbro-Bejarano, “Chicana Literature” 215).

While it seems likely that, in the years of the form’s popularity, a moderate number of *teatropoesía* pieces were created and performed, a record remains of only four of them: *Chicana*, which was conceived and performed by Dorina Moreno and Las Cucarachas in 1974; *Cabuliando in Motion*, written and performed in 1979 by Oliva Chumacero and Rogelio “Smiley” Rojas; *Voz de la mujer*, presented by Valentina Productions, and *Tongues of Fire*, both produced in 1981 (Yarbro-Bejarano, “*Teatropoesía*” 78-81). Though of the same form,

these performance pieces functioned in different ways. Their common threads are a similar dramatic structure and the focus on the cyclical/ historical construction of feminist identity. They were “characterized by short scenes, monologues, or poems in which women break silence, find a voice, and enunciate their subjectivity in relation to other women across generations” (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach *Stages of Life* 58). In different ways, all of these pieces attempt to answer Socorro Valdez’s wish for a theatrical representation of the phases of womanhood which, for the Chicana feminist, is almost always linked with motherhood.

The first highly visible *teatropoesía* performance appears to have been *Chicana*, produced by a company called Las Cucarachas. This piece used poetry and prose, as well as music and dance to evoke a range of images of powerful Chicanas, including Mother Earth, the “*mujer rebelde*” who demands equality with men and participates actively in social and political struggles” (Yarbro-Bejarano, “Teatropoesía” 79) and other iconic mothers and strong women. Through its subject matter and its form, the work emphasized the power of motherhood and the problems with male domination, but it did so selectively. It began with *la indígena* – the indigenous, pre-Conquest woman. Rather than directly address the challenge presented by La Malinche, this early Chicana work “passed over the Conquest in silence” (Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Female Subject” 139), choosing instead to focus on icons of female power that were more generally acceptable to a broad Chicano audience, including Tonantzín and the Adelita figures from the Mexican Revolution. The piece

closed with “*la nueva Chicana*” (the new Chicana) who gains permission for her strength and her feminist identity from all of the women that came before her (Yarbro-Bejarano, “Teatropoesía” 79). The progression from *la indigena* to *la nueva Chicana* in this piece was carefully arranged to make a feminist argument within the context of the Chicano movement that rejected the movement’s assumptions about and arguments against feminism. In addition to arranging their performance to emphasize motherhood as part of the Chicana’s power, in the program they created for the performance the company “stressed the perpetuation of family life as well as the recognition of India/Latina women who have passed into history for their participation in the liberation of their people”(Yarbro-Bejarano, “Female Subject” 139). After presenting the piece at a minifestival in San Francisco, Las Cucarachas eventually traveled to Mexico to perform at the Quinto Festival (the fifth annual TENAZ festival), thereby reaching women on both sides of the border.

Five years later, in 1979, two company members from El Teatro Campesino brought a touring show to community groups and social service agencies in San Juan Bautista (the home of El Teatro Campesino). In response to the growing commercialism of ETC, Oliva Chamucero had begun to seek more community-focused ways of doing theatre (Yarbro-Bejarano, “Chicana’s Experience in Collective Theatre” 49). The *teatropoesía* piece she created alongside one of her male company members, Rogelio “Smiley” Rojas, provided her with an opportunity to break from the male-dominated practices of ETC. The piece, called *Cabuliando in Motion* (Barrio-speak in Motion), presented the

cycle of life from male and female perspectives through a cycle of poems presented dramatically. These two experienced poets and theatre artists found ways of bringing the text to life, though Yvonne Yarbrow-Barajano comments that some of the poems were harder to “translate into action” than others. This difficulty highlights the potential challenge of a theatrical form based on texts that were not necessarily written to be performed. However, the oral tradition of Chicana culture lends itself to the kind of performative gesture made by *teatropoetas*, and the selection of performative texts for performance rarely a stumbling-block for the artists who created and performed in this form (“Teatropoesía” 80).

Following the same historically-focused pattern as Dorinda Moreno and Las Cucarachas, Valentina Productions created *Voz de la mujer* (Voice of the woman) (Ramírez 85-86). The piece was performed early in 1981, at the 11<sup>th</sup> annual TENAZ festival. Valentina Productions grew out of a group of women who participated in W.I.T. together and had similar artistic ideas. Like *Chicana*, the piece focused on centuries’ worth of historical antecedents to the contemporary Chicana feminist, beginning with the Aztecs and moving through Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and the Adelita figures from the Mexican Revolution. The piece also addressed the relationship between men and women and mythic constructions of motherhood along the way. Though the piece was artistically sound, the company broke up immediately after presenting it, largely due to financial, personal, and ideological problems faced by individuals within the collective organization (Yarbro-Bejarano, “Teatropoesía” 80).

The final piece to be discussed, *Tongues of Fire*, appeared in October of 1981. It was scripted by Barbara Brinson-Pineda, using texts from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings from Radical Women of Color*, a volume co-edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. The piece

... broke new ground in focusing on the Chicana subject as writer, drawing from Anzaldúa's essay ["Speaking in Tongues"] which gave the play its title. The text did not privilege one Chicana voice, but created a collective subject through the inclusion of many individual voices speaking to multiple facets of what it means to be Chicana ... denouncing exploitation and racism but also the subordination of Chicanas through their culture's rigid gender roles and negative attitudes toward female sexuality.(Yarbro-Bejarano, "Chicana Literature" 217)

The heavily non-linear, "literary" emphasis of *Tongues of Fire*, both in its form and in its content, made it significantly distinct from the three *teatropoesía* pieces that preceded it (Yarbro-Bejarano, "*Teatropoesía*" 83). Although the focus of *Tongues of Fire* was not as historical as had been that of *Chicana* and *Voz de la mujer*, the idea of history – a confluence of women leading up to the contemporary Chicana writer – was still present in the work (81), as was a clear feminist agenda.

As the theatrical companion to *This Bridge Called My Back*, the "Tongues of Fire" project refuses to reconstitute the formal and thematic strictures of oedipal narrative and explores the

articulation of subjectivity and community through a plural and non-unified structure. (Neate 198)

If the enthusiastic evaluation of scholars is to be a measure, *Tongues of Fire* appears to have been the pinnacle of the form of *teatropoesía*, achieving fusion of form and content, exploring new facets of Chicana identity in a compelling way, and carving a space for the feminist mode of narrative that would follow it. By the time this piece was conceived and produced, *teatropoesía* had become a recognizable form and *Colored Girls* had become an international hit, and the participants in this production had both literary and theatrical experience, as well as an ideal forum. Presented at Mills College in Oakland, CA, as part of a conference entitled, “The Cultural Roots of Chicana Literature: 1890-1980 – A Public Inquiry,” the piece was written by a Chicana literature professor and directed by a member of El Teatro Campesino.

All four of these *teatropoesía* pieces drew on historical and literary sources to construct a history for contemporary Chicana feminists, offering a new mode of creating Chicana feminist identity and presenting Chicana feminist ideas to an audience. A comment by Yolanda Broyles-González, made in reference to later work by Chicana solo performers, applies here, as well:

The performances have the freedom to be radically countercultural and creative because they are neither tied to the censorship and aesthetic expectations of theatrical institutions, nor are they tied to dominating men. That freedom has allowed strong women’s voices to finally be heard. (Broyles-González, “Performance Artist” 88)

Unfortunately, the form seems to have fallen away in the years immediately following the success of *Tongues of Fire*.

#### **3.5.4 TEATROPOESÍA AND THE MATERNAL ARCHETYPE IN EARLY CHICANA DRAMATURGY**

*Teatropoesía* as a unique performance form disappears from the historical record in the mid-1980s, falling away with the decline of the larger *Teatro* movement. In its place appears a legacy of solo performance work and individually-scripted plays. A look at plays and performance pieces written by Chicanas in the mid- to late 1980s gives strong evidence of the influence of the earlier form on the later drama. Much like the earlier *teatropoesía* pieces, early drama by individual Chicanas used non-linear structure and exploited the performative value of poetry and prose in order to reject constructions of womanhood based in limited understandings of mythical mothers. An excellent example of this approach is Denise Chávez's *Novena Narratives y Ofrendas Nuevomexicanas*, first produced in 1986.

In a 2003 article, Yolanda Broyles-González identifies *Novena Narratives* as representing one of the two strands of Chicana/o drama. Unlike the “post-*movimiento*, individually-authored dramatized literary works characteristic of Chicanas/os ‘breaking into print,’” Chávez’s one-woman piece is representative of the “more contemporary proliferation of one-woman (or one-man) performance pieces presented anywhere possible.” In this latter strand, Broyles-González includes “the relatively rare, one-woman, multi-voiced poetry performances” (“Performance Artist” 87). It appears that this, then, is what



became of *teatropoesía*. It has, in fact, been described as “a precursor of solo [Chicana] women’s performance art” (Marerro, “Out of the Fringe” 135).

Because poetry tends to be classified as an isolated form with individual focus, the link between *teatropoesía* and solo performance is fairly clear. Apart from the obvious challenge of shifting from the private act of writing to the public act of performance, solo performance is a natural outgrowth of personal writing.

In her article about contemporary solo performer Maria Elena Gaitin, Broyles-González points out that “many ... Chicana one-woman shows grew from the negative patriarchal legacy of the civil rights movement” (Broyles-González, “Performance Artist” 88). The roots of this development can be seen as coming through the performance form of *teatropoesía* and into solo performance via Chávez’s *Novena Narratives*. Chávez has written poetry, prose, and plays in the course of her career, and considers herself “a performance writer” (Denise Chávez). The performative thrust of her writing contributes to the overall success of *Novena Narratives*. While the text of the play is prose instead of poetry, the structure of the text (as confessional monologues) is closely connected to the style of *teatropoesía*, far more than to works from the Chicano theatre movement.

Calling attention to her connection to the historical situation of Chicanas in *Teatro*, Chávez indicates, “my training in theatre has helped me to write roles that I myself would enjoy acting” (Denise Chávez). The desire to create valuable roles for women extends in *Novena Narratives* into an exploration of

the multiplicity of Chicana identity. Chávez's play is a series of nine monologues, delivered as prayers to an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Chávez's exploration of identity is particularly reminiscent of the works of *teatro poetas*, particularly the women of Valentina Productions. She chooses to discard linear plot and to create shorter pieces that build into a larger image of Chicana identity, all the while focusing "attention on the ideology of Marianismo, the cult that views women as semidivine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Quintana 101). A central image for the play is the statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe to whom the *ofrenda* of each character is made. By drawing our attention to this figure, Chavez reminds us of the construction of Chicana identity within Chicano culture—the programming of women to assume a role of passivity and sacrifice. Throughout the piece, we meet a variety of characters ranging in age from 7 to 78, each of whom shares aspects of her relationship with God, the Church, the Virgin, and her own female-ness. The play is a reflection of the Chicana's conflicted relationship with one of her culture's most ubiquitous icons.

The 7-year-old character calls the Virgin the "God Mother," contrasting her with the frightening image of God.

See God on the altar? He's got big black strange eyes and silver lighting coming out of his head. Look the other way!

(*Pointing the other direction*) And that's the God Mother. She's not old and ugly. She's real pretty! I never had a mother, except when I was born and was real sick and almost died.

Dear Mother of God, save me from the fires of Miss Rael's Hell! I don't want to be afraid of the dark or of God the Man, or spiders, or tunnels that never end, or having babies ... I want to be a mother someday, when I'm not afraid anymore, okay? (160)

She views the Virgin as her savior and God as the source of fear; she imbues Guadalupe with the courage the little girl lacks, subtly embracing the Tonantzin aspect of the maternal figure.

Chavéz is not always subtle as she plays with assumptions of Guadalupe as a static, pure figure, free of sin. In another moment, a woman who tells us she is the mother of seven children offers her prayer to Guadalupe as she simultaneously embodies the Virgin and the Whore. She reveals the many men she's taken to her bed, explaining that "I just want to help people ... I see the good in all men" (162). This sympathetically-drawn character offers her body in what she understands as selflessness, demonstrating a fusion of the hyper-sexualized Malinche and the self-sacrificing Guadalupe and defying the notion of Malinche as evil in either intent or action.

In *Novena Narratives*, as in *Tongues of Fire*, the idea of Chicana-as-writer is central. As the play opens, Isabel, who is the narrator of the piece—the central vision through which the rest of the monologues are seen—says, "Somebody asked me what I do for a living. I am an artist I said. I write. I am a writer" (150). In this case, Isabel's opening lines both establish the centrality of the writer to the drama and establish the convention of Isabel as narrator/performer of the other women who will speak (Neate 211). Here again,

the playwright seems to be responding to the approach of *teatropoesía* by playing with notions of framing and construction of self.

### 3.6 SEARCHING FOR THE DRAMATIC

The success of the Chicano theatre movement in raising awareness of the plight of the farmworker and, later, Chicanos in general reinforced the potential of theatre as a mode of activism. Chicana feminists' experience within the Chicano Nationalist movement, was a struggle with the limiting and negative depictions of the Chicana as seen through the lens of *machismo*. Rather than battling the entrenched *machismo* of the movement and attempting to reform the male-run companies, Chicanas sought to create a theatrical space and, eventually, a form of their own.

In the 1970s and the early 1980s, Chicanas worked together to form theatrical collectives that could support their goal of providing theatrical space for the presentation of Chicana issues. In these early years, Chicanas used the forms that had been popularized and proven effective by the Chicano Theatre Movement—particularly the *acto*, and their work could be seen almost exclusively in community centers and on college campuses. Because they had limited training as playwrights, however, many Chicana poets, scholars, and theatre practitioners also worked to create a new form that could use existing texts to present Chicana concerns in a performative context: *teatropoesía*.

Chicana theatrical production from the mid-1980s to the present can be traced

back to these converging paths, and the legacy of both is evident in later Chicana dramaturgy.

## 4.0 CHAPTER 3: THE NEW MESTIZA ON STAGE: CHICANA PLAYWRIGHTS COMING OF AGE

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The plays I explore in this chapter were first produced between 1988 and 1995, in the aftermath of two developments of particular significance to Chicana feminist drama: Maria Irene Fornes had begun leading the Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Lab at INTAR; and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* initially reached publication. Chicana feminism was coming of age in the form of Border Theory, and Chicanas were gaining access to training as playwrights,<sup>2</sup> as well as production opportunities. The convergence of critical perspective, training, and access provided the perfect backdrop for an explosion in Chicana playwriting.

Chicana theatrical work in this period is frequently categorized with Latina theatre—even by the playwrights themselves in some cases. When exploring broad issues of gender and race, there is certainly an argument to be

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<sup>2</sup> Estella Portillo Trambley is an exception to this narrative of the history of Chicana feminist playwrights, and the fact that her plays were being produced and published in the 1970s is worthy of note. Her artistic and professional trajectory, mainly for reasons of geography (she was in Texas, working with a small theatre company that needed material, so she decided to start writing plays), is quite different from that of every other Chicana feminist playwright on record.

made for grouping Chicanas' work with other feminist writers of Latin American descent; their experiences of racial discrimination and patriarchy have significant overlap with one another. However, these cultures do not consolidate some universal "Latina/o" experience irrespective of either ethnicity or geography. Cultural history, traditions, food, and language differ greatly, and thus the ways in which feminist playwrights explore and construct identity differ, as well. In addition, geographic concentrations of different ethnic groups in different parts of the United States have a significant effect on artistic influence, history, and access to the arts. Chicana feminist playwrights have largely come out of the Southwest—particularly southern California, New Mexico, and Texas, whereas Cuban and Puerto Rican feminist playwrights have often come out of the east. When Chicana playwriting is placed under the Latina umbrella, key components of the Chicana experience are given less consideration than they merit. In particular, analysis of Chicana plays that are positioned as Latina plays often excludes consideration of the physical and metaphorical border and of motherhood myths. Gloria Anzaldúa's work provides an excellent framework for looking at these elements of the Chicana experience.

#### **4.2 BORDER THEORY: AWAKENING THE NEW MESTIZA**

As a Mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential

lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective culture because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.” Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* 102-103

Gloria Anzaldúa had been writing and theorizing on Women of Color feminism for more than a decade before she wrote *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In the mid-1970s, she taught in the University of Texas at Austin’s “La Mujer Chicana” program, an experience she credits with connecting her to the queer community and feminism. In addition, she co-edited, with Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, in 1983. She is, however, best known for writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a foundational text in the area of Border Theory.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa provides a public forum for a discussion that had been happening inside Chicana artistic production up to that point, but had gotten little attention outside the limited circle of Chicana writers and



artists. She speaks of the double oppression of the Chicana: based on race and gender, but she does not stop with that. Instead, she weaves a narrative of the physical border between Mexico and the United States as a wound that inflicts itself upon the Chicana, who must live a life on both sides of the border—linguistically, culturally, and sometimes physically. The work expresses the Chicana experience, locating it both geographically and personally, and provides a tool for reading Chicana feminist explorations of identity formation. Anzaldúa’s work explores the possibility of both-and as an alternative to either-or, “breaking down binary dualisms and creating the third space, the in-between, border, or interstice that allows contradictions to co-exist in the production of the new element (*mestizaje*, or hybridity)” (Yarbro-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldúa” 84), encouraging Chicanas to embrace a New Mestiza Consciousness that encompasses all parts of herself. “At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once ... ” (100) Rather than struggling with the “constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between two ways,” Anzaldúa demands that *la mestiza* find a new way—that she “act and not react” (101).

In addition to advocating for the New Mestiza Consciousness, Anzaldúa does much of the work of reclaiming and repositioning the mother archetypes that pervade Chicano culture and the definitions of motherhood available to a young Chicana woman. “Anzaldúa constructs a ‘mythos’ of *Mestizaje* to explore and explode the ways in which socially enforced paradigms are established

through surface and conceptual metaphors as well as the ways in which these metaphors seem to label people as acceptable or unacceptable” (Aigner-Veroz 47). Anzaldúa dissects the figures of Guadalupe, Malinche, and Llorona, refusing to accept their conventional use as metaphors for good and bad motherhood and instead revealing them as transcultural figures, containing elements imbued by a series of cultures over the centuries. As constructed figures, then, these maternal archetypes are open for reconstruction. They are not fixed, and the Chicana feminist can do with them what she is empowered to do for herself: construct an interpretation from the many cultural and historic forces at work within and upon them. In the plays I discuss in this chapter, the playwrights employ this tactic both incidentally and with deliberation, inscribing new definitions on old archetypes, informed by lived experience and developing consciousness.

Anzaldúa’s theorizing about the New Mestiza Consciousness is evident in all of the plays discussed in this chapter. In each play, we encounter a young Chicana woman, struggling through the formation of her own identity in conversation (and conflict) with both Anglo American and Mexican/Chicano traditions and expectations. Each protagonist faces a crisis of identity as she is “torn between two ways,” and each, ultimately, constructs her own path and her own identity, “on both shores at once.” Each protagonist embodies Anzaldúa’s New Mestiza Consciousness, embracing her own both/and-ness and intertwining the many facets of herself into something new and capable of negotiating the border-crossings that are inherent in the Chicana experience.

Each chooses hybridity over dichotomy and finds resolution to her crisis by kneading together of the pieces of herself into a new whole.

### **4.3 MOTHERING THE CHICANA WRITER: MARIA IRENE FORNES**

She allowed me to enter the art of playwriting through a poet's sensibility ... Had I not begun writing plays with Maria Irene, I never would have become a playwright.

(Cherrie Moraga, quoted in Ramírez and Casiano 69)

If Luis Valdez is the father of the Chicano Theatre, then Maria Irene Fornes is its mother. Fornes led the Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Lab at INTAR from 1981-1994. During that time, she trained an entire generation of Latino/a and Chicano/a playwrights, including most of the playwrights whose work will be explored in this and the next chapter. Fornes' influence and legacy in Latino/a theatre generally are already quite well documented, but her role in the growth of the Chicano Theatre Movement is frequently underemphasized. This lack of emphasis can be attributed to two factors: Fornes' ethnicity and her gender. Fornes is of Cuban descent, and the narrative of the Chicano Theatre movement in particular emphasizes nationalism; recall that part of the reason Luis Valdez left the Farmworkers' Movement was the fact that its inclusivity conflicted with his nationalist leanings. And the patriarchal focus of Chicano Theatre tends to disregard or undervalue the work of a woman.

In 1996, Jorge Huerta wrote: “We’ve come from the Valdezian collective to the Fornesian individual vision” (Quoted in Marrero 47). Fornes taught individual playwrights how to craft plays, while Valdez focused on the building and training of agit-prop theatre collectives. Both approaches remain evident in today’s Chicana/o Theatre, though the business of commercial theatre tends to favor the individual vision over the collective, and this might help to explain why Chicanas have been more visible than have Chicanos as playwrights in the past few decades, as Chicano playwrights did not pursue the same training opportunities as did Chicanas.

While not all of the plays discussed in this chapter were necessarily impacted by Fornesian training or Anzaldúa’s work in particular, their work represents a confluence of training and theorizing that began to take shape in the mid-1980s and led to a surge in Chicana playwriting. In the late 1980s, Chicanas began writing fully-realized, individually-authored dramatic works about the Chicana experience. The blend of humor, social criticism, myth, and departure from realism that characterized these works demonstrates the influences at work in Chicana feminist playwriting. It is possible to see in these plays the influences of both the Valdezian collectivism and the Fornesian individualism that represent the foundation of Chicana drama. In many cases, the plays present an individual perspective while borrowing tactics and stylistic elements from the *teatro* collectives.

The plays I examine in this chapter, *Simply María, or the American Dream*, by Josefina López, *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, by Edit

Villareal, and *The Fat-Free Chicana and the Snow Cap Queen*, by Elaine Romero all focus on a Chicana coming-of-age and coming-to-terms with the fusion of tradition and resistance that defines the New Mestiza. These works exemplify the New Mestiza Consciousness that Anzaldúa advocates in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In each of these plays, the protagonist, a young Chicana, contends with both the divided cultural self on the border between Anglo America and Chicano culture and the Guadalupe/Malinche dichotomy, as she enters womanhood and faces the anxiety of those around her about the “kind of woman” she will become. In *Simply María*, the protagonist rejects the traditional expectations of her parents. She refuses to accept that she must—with Guadalupean piety—marry and live for hearth and home, or she will become a Malinche, forgetting her Mexican roots and risking moral bankruptcy. In *My Visits with MGM*, the protagonist copes with her mother’s abandonment and embraces her grandmother’s non-traditional, Malinche-like, behavior while combating an aggressively pious aunt. In *The Fat-Free Chicana*, the protagonist, having forgotten her roots, pushes back against tradition and must do battle with two Guadalupe stand-ins (La Conquistadora and The Snow-Cap Queen) in order to find a balance between her Mexican and US selves.

These early Chicana plays share one other characteristic: they all embrace a comedic approach to their subject matter. By using comedy, the playwrights acknowledge and attend to the resistance they know their plays will face, providing a light-hearted and easy-to-digest approach to topics that

are likely to invoke anger, sadness, and even resentment from both white and Chicano audiences. This is not to say that the use of comedy headed off all resistance to Chicana feminist plays, but rather that the use of comedy made Chicana feminist plays more easily accessible for those audiences which may have lacked familiarity with the Chicana experience. This comic approach to social commentary carries forward from the work of El Teatro Campesino and reflects the ongoing influence of the Chicano theatre tradition on the Chicana playwright.

#### **4.4 SIMPLY MARÍA: REJECTING THE BINARY**

As much as I love Luis Valdez, a lot of the women were still virgin-mother-whore, and I felt like, you know, we're more than that.

We're a combination of all three! And then I said, you know, it's not up to Luis Valdez to write every role every Latino experience, because it's such a—there's so much to write about that—I should write them. (López, interview with Jorge Huerta, *Necessary Theatre*)

Josefina López was 17 when her first play, *Simply María, or the American Dream* was first produced as part of the California Young Playwrights project in early 1988. With its success came a 6-month internship to study with Maria Irene Fornes at INTAR, as well as a production at South Coast Repertory theatre later in the same year. The positive reception, both critical and popular,

of the play speaks volumes. López's humorous dismantling of Chicana identity construction is both insightful and effective. The play was anthologized in *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women* in 1992, and published on its own by The Dramatic Publishing Company in 1996.

In her notes on the published version of the play, López talks of her late teens as a time of conflict. "My parents would tell me to do one thing and then I would go to school and my teachers would tell me to reach for the stars. I was living in two different worlds that kept clashing." The young woman, after seeing Luis Valdez's *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges*, and reflecting on the racism she would face as a Chicana actress, "decided to start writing to create roles for Latinas and for myself ... I write to empower myself because I grew up feeling very helpless ... I became the protagonist of all my plays and took charge of my life" (Lopez, *Simply María* 6). Significantly, *Simply María* has been staged several times by El Teatro Campesino, and was performed with another of Valdez's plays, *Soledad Razo*, in 1990. At the time, Valdez described López as "one of the most brilliant young voices writing for the theater in this country today" (Churnin). The approval of the father of Chicano theatre was no small thing, and his words are both a testament to López's talent and a reflection of her contribution to Chicana/o theatre. López remains one of the most-produced Chicana/o playwrights, as both *Simply María* and her later play, *Real Women Have Curves*, have become mainstays, particularly for regional theatres and community-based theatre groups.

In *Simply María*, López explores the competing forces at work in a young Chicana woman's attempts at self-determination. Much of the semi-autobiographical play occurs in a dream the title character has after fighting with her parents over her desire to go to college. Throughout the play, she copes with a cultural anxiety, manifested by her parents, over the Guadalupe/Malinche dichotomy. Her parents believe, and reinforce for her, that she must get married and become a mother; getting an education, they fear, will lead her both to reject her Mexican heritage and to become morally corrupt. María, on the other hand, wants the freedom to pursue her own version of the American Dream, one not limited by either her cultural heritage or her gender. In the course of dismantling her parents' limited understanding of a Chicana's potential, López challenges many of the myths that contribute to a Chicana's understanding of herself, expressing the challenges of balancing the cultural influences and demands of the US and Mexico.

The title of this play emphasizes the playwright's effort to challenge both Mexican and American cultural constructions of womanhood, love, and motherhood; it describes the two ideals to which the title character will be expected to strive while simultaneously emphasizing their incompatibility. The first half of the title references a popular *telenovela*, *Simplemente María* whose plot line "draws on the Cinderella theme of the beautiful young woman from the lower class who raises her socioeconomic status through marriage to a wealthy man" (Flores 79). López juxtaposes this reference with "The American Dream," that has historically been coded as white and of the United States. The



American Dream of white America categorically rejects the racially-marked, economically-disadvantaged Mexican represented in the melodramatic *telenovela* form. As is typical of telenovelas, *Simplemente María* offered a fantastical version of the future imagined for María by her parents: marriage, wealth, motherhood, and, therefore, happiness. This was, of course, tempered by a heavy dose of soap opera-esque reversals of fortune, but the message of the *telenovela* form is strictly conservative: a Mexican (or Chicana) woman's dream must be limited to marriage and motherhood. María's dream of going to college and creating her own life reflects the hopes of a white, middle class woman; it represents for her parents a rejection of her heritage.

The play occurs mostly in the dream and memory (real or imagined) of its protagonist, María, a young Chicana who has tried and failed to convince her parents that she should go to college. López navigates the many cultural constructions of Mexican and Chicana womanhood as her title character negotiates the chaotic and often nightmarish intersection between what a Chicana is told her life should be and what her life is.

The play itself demonstrates the hybridity that is characteristic of Anzaldúa's New Mestiza Consciousness in both its form and its content. López uses a pastiche of cultural references, mirroring styles and challenging assumptions as she goes. She draws equally from US and Mexican references, and her dialogue manifests the code-switching that is characteristic of much Chicano/a writing, shifting frequently between Spanish and English. López emphasizes the competing images of ideal woman- and, eventually,

motherhood available to the young Chicana. She plays with, among other forms, *telenovelas*, *charro* films, fairy tales, and TV commercials, placing each at odds with María's desire for self-determination. The overall form of the play demonstrates the influence of the *acto* on López as a young playwright, as it utilizes many of the same devices and tactics as the *actos* of ETC, including broad characterizations; short, humorous scenes; and pointed political messages.

From the outset, Lopez dismantles the myths that form a young woman's notions of marriage and motherhood. In the first scene of the play, María watches her parents' elopement. The scene is titled "Romeo and Juliet elope," but the events of the scene undercut the easily-recognizable Shakespearean balcony scene. Ricardo arrives in the middle of the night. Carmen climbs down from her balcony and is disappointed to find out that, rather than a horse, Ricardo has brought an old bicycle to carry her off. Here, López juxtaposes a classic love story with the fairy tale expectations of a young woman and dismantles both with a much dingier, lived version of events.

This pattern is continued in Scene Two, in which a pregnant Carmen is stood up at the altar because Ricardo has not managed to get a divorce from his first wife. This moment is immediately followed by the actual wedding in which a no-longer-pregnant Carmen, now holding the baby María, who was born between the failed wedding and this one, is quickly and unceremoniously married to Ricardo. The baby María is baptized and far more ceremoniously inscribed with a lengthy series of cultural expectations.

NARRATOR: The making of a Mexican girl. *(The statues now transform into THREE ANGELIC GIRLS who begin to hum, then sing beautifully with only the word "María." They come center stage and deliver the following, facing the audience:)* ALL: María.

GIRL 1: As a girl you are to be

GIRL 2: Nice,

GIRL 3: forgiving,

GIRL 1: considerate.

GIRL 2: obedient,

GIRL 3: gentle

GIRL 1: hard-working

GIRL 2: gracious.

GIRL 3: You are to like:

GIRL 1: Dolls,

GIRL 2: kitchens,

GIRL 3: houses,

GIRL 1: cleaning,

GIRL 2: caring for children,

GIRL 3: cooking,

GIRL 1: laundry,

GIRL 2: dishes.

GIRL 3: You are not to:

GIRL 1: Be independent,

GIRL 2: enjoy sex,

GIRL 3: but must endure it as your duty to your husband,

GIRL 1: and bear his children.

GIRL 2: Do not shame your society!

GIRL 3: Never,

GIRL 1: never,

GIRL 2: never,

ALL: Never!!!!

GIRL 1: Your goal is to reproduce.

GIRL 2: And your only purpose in life is to serve three men:

GIRL 3: Your father,

GIRL 1: your husband,

GIRL 2: and your son. (119)

In this scene, Lopez highlights the fact that her identity as a Mexican girl was constructed for her in infancy. She sets up for the audience the bonds of identity that the María must dismantle in order to determine her own path.

Immediately after the marriage and baptism, Ricardo leaves Carmen and María to go to the United States in pursuit of work and a better future for his family. In Scene Three, López takes aim at the myth of the Statue of Liberty, highlighting the distinction between European immigrants' experience of welcome and Mexican immigrants' experience of rejection as they enter the United States.

STATUE OF LIBERTY: I give you life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for the price of your heritage, your roots, your history, your relatives, your language. . . Conform, adapt, bury your past, give up what is yours and I'll give you the opportunity to have what is mine.

...

*("America the Beautiful" becomes overwhelming; lights flash, representing the fireworks. A few seconds later the same lights that adorn the celebration for EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS become the lights from the helicopters hunting after the MEXICAN PEOPLE. Hound dogs are also heard barking, and the MEXICAN PEOPLE scatter and try to hide.) (121)*

Ricardo manages to make it safely into the United States, and in the Scene Four, he sends for his family to join him.

Scene Five plays on the Mexican *charro* films, as María and Carmen arrive in Los Angeles and are promptly separated in the chaos of the city. *"(RICARDO, dressed in a charro outfit enters and gives some yells as if ready to sing a corrido. All the chaos of the city stops, and all the city people recoil in fear. RICARDO becomes the hero rescuing CARMEN and MARÍA from their nightmare.)"* (123) Unlike the other scenes in the play, which emphasize the fact that reality directly contradicts the expectations created by cultural myths, this scene allows the perceptions of a little girl to override reality. To the young María, her father is a heroic figure, and her skewed vision of him informs her

reception of his words in Scene Six, as he brings her and her mother to their new home in the housing projects. The Narrator tells us, “No one likes it here, but it’s cheap. Es Barato.” A title appears, labeling this scene, “LITTLE HOUSE IN THE GHETTO.”

RICARDO: María, I brought you to America so that you can have a better life. It wasn’t easy for me. I was hiding in a truck with a lot of other people for hours. It was so hot and humid that people preferred to get caught by the migra than die of suffocation. But I was going to make it because I knew that I had a daughter to live for. I did it for you. In America, the education is great! You can take advantage of all the opportunities offered to you. You can work hard to be just as good as anybody. You can be anything you want to be! (124)

Unlike in Scene Five, in which Ricardo’s position as hero is unchallenged by either form or content, in Scene Six, his words are undercut by the Narrator’s introduction of their new home.

In Scene Six, María grows up, a Chicana in the United States, from a young girl into an 18-year-old. In a series of vignettes with her parents, she experiences the reinscription of the identity construction that was first performed at her baptism, and her father has transformed from a source of hope and promise into a source of anxiety and criticism. María’s efforts to behave in ways that contradict expectations of gender and tradition are

rejected by her parents, and each encounter is punctuated with the appearance of the Three Angelic Girls, who remind María that she must

GIRL 1: Never shame your society.

GIRL 2: Never,

GIRL 3: never,

GIRL 1: never,

ALL: NEVER!!! (125)

She is told she cannot play football because “It’s not proper for a lady” (125).

María responds with confusion, already experiencing the stress of being forced to negotiate conflicting expectations from her father who tells her to compete and her mother who tells her to be ladylike. Next, Ricardo tells her, “I don’t want you walking home or talking to boys. Study!” (125) This moment with her father represents María’s first warning about sexuality. It is followed immediately with her mother’s admonition (after discovering María masturbating) that “Women should be pure. Men don’t marry women who are not unless they have to. Quieren vírgenes. It’s best that way, if you save yourself for your wedding night. Be submissive” (126). As María grows into womanhood, her father criticizes her for her failures in the domestic sphere and ridicules her desire to prioritize her schoolwork over housework. “How about if I give you a trophy for washing the dishes when you are supposed to, and for doing the laundry right?” (127) The scene culminates with María receiving a letter granting her a full college scholarship, a letter she opens and reads alone in her bedroom because she fears her parents’ reaction.

In a scene reminiscent of *Chicana Goes to College*, Scene Seven presents María's confrontation with her parents over her desire to go to college. Their response is to reinscribe their definition of a Mexican Woman on her.

RICARDO: I don't want you to forget that you are a Mexican. There are so many people where I work who deny that they are Mexican. When their life gets better they stop being Mexican! To deny one's country is to deny one's past, one's parents. How ungrateful!

MARÍA: Papi, I won't. But you said that with an education I could be just as good as anybody. And that's why you brought me to America.

RICARDO: No. Get married!

MARÍA: I will. But I want a career as well. Women can now do both.

RICARDO: Don't tell me about modern women. What kind of wife would that woman make if she's busy with her career and can't tend to her house, children and husband.

MARÍA: And that's all a woman is for? To have children? Clean a house? Tend to her husband like a slave? (129)

More than a decade after Teatro de las Chicanas created their *acto* about the resistance a Chicana faces in pursuing her education, López expresses the same frustrations in her own play, demonstrating the ongoing difficulties Chicanas faced in breaking free from the cultural expectation that limits Chicanas to wife- and motherhood. María struggles with the conflict between



what she has been told she can be and what her parents tell her she must be. Faced with the possibility that their daughter might pursue the American Dream, Ricardo and Carmen admonish her to embrace instead their dream of an ideal Mexican daughter. They emphasize the importance of servitude to her future husband and, later in the scene, virginity until marriage. María's parents want her to emulate Guadalupe—chaste and self-sacrificing, and they fear that education will turn her instead in a Malinche—promiscuous and rejecting her heritage. As the scene ends, María's mother asks her husband to give their daughter a chance, then goes to María's room to console her daughter. Modeling the Guadalupean obedience she has inscribed into her daughter, she defends her husband's reaction, "That's the way your father is. Ni modo" (130). María loses her temper, and eventually, exhausted, she falls asleep.

Scene Eight begins the dream. María is awakened in her dream by Myth, who offers to show her "what can be." Myth is quickly driven off by Mary, who represents María's American Self. Mary touts her sexual independence and her freedom to be anything she wants to be, but she is quickly interrupted by María 2, who represents María's Mexican Self.

*(GIRL 1, who will portray MARÍA 2, appears, brandishing a broom.)*

MARÍA 2: You bad woman! You bitch!

MARY: I'm not!

MARÍA 2: You American demon. You are. You are. You just want to tempt her, then hurt her.

MARÍA: (*Throwing MARY her whip.*) Mary, catch! (131)

The two characters participate first in a fake swordfight with their respective weapons, then in a literal wrestling match. Both attempt to play dirty, but María 2 prevails, and Mary is dragged off, calling out to María to put her womanhood before her motherhood and married duties. María 2 counters with an echo from scene 2, “A woman’s only purpose in life is to serve three men. Her father, her husband and her son” (132). Her father appears to carry María to her wedding, where he hands her off to her groom. The priest provides Mary with a long list of wifely duties she must agree to:

... accept José Juan González García López as your lawfully wedded husband to love, cherish, serve, cook for, clean for, sacrifice for, have his children, keep his house, love him even if he beats you, commits adultery, gets drunk, rapes you lawfully, denies you your identity, money, love his family, serve his family, and in return ask for nothing? (132)

The groom, on the other hand, is asked only “Do you accept María García González López as your lawfully wedded wife to support?” (132) María’s ring is a dog collar, and her new husband “walks” her down the aisle. María’s imagined marriage dehumanizes her, positioning her as an obedient animal.

As Scene Nine opens, María is pregnant and watching a *telenovela* called *Happily Everafter* which, in the dream, is being filmed in her living room.

Before being forced out of the room by the Floor Manager, María cheers on the

main female character's decision to leave her husband "in search of freedom" (133). Again, López undercuts the fairy tale myth of Happily Ever After by providing her audience with a woman's rebellion against the constraints of marriage. Marriage, we are reminded again, is not María's goal for herself. She does not want to be a Guadalupe. López further undercuts the narrative that tells María that all she needs to do in life is to be a good wife and mother by closing the scene with María's husband coercing her into sex she clearly doesn't want.

JOSÉ: María! ¡Mi amor! Come here, baby! ... Come on, mijita. I won't hurt you ... *(He continues to try to persuade her. Eventually he gets his way. There are sounds of lust and pain. Finally, MARÍA gives out a loud scream of pain.)*

JOSÉ: What is it?

MARÍA: The baby! (134)

María's dream of what it means to acquiesce to her parents' judgment and accept the life of a submissive, obedient, self-sacrificing Mexican wife is a nightmare that includes being treated like a dog, being forced into sex, and, in Scene Ten, turning into "The Reproducing Machine" (135).

Over the course of Scene Ten, María gives birth to six daughters, to her husband's great displeasure. He names the girls Sacrifice, Abnegation, Obligation, Frustration, Regret, and Disappointment. The birth scene is figured as a commercial for the "Reproducing Machine."

SALESMAN: ... if you were watching earlier, you saw the other amazing function. It can also be used as a sex object ... Yes siree! You can be the boss. It's at your disposal. Hours of pleasure. And if it ever does go out of control, a kick and a few punches will do the job and it will be back to normal ... It's made in Mexico. It's cheap! It cooks! It cleans! ... Its stretchmarks can stretch all the way from here to Tijuana ... It delivers up to twenty-one children. It feeds on beans, chile and lies. (135)

López engages playfully but pointedly with the notion of the “Ideal Mexican Mother” in this scene. While María suffers and screams through the pain of childbirth, and José rejects each of his children for being female, the Salesman advertises the Mexican mother as an object to be purchased, used, and beaten when it rebels.

María's dehumanization continues in Scene Eleven, titled “The Nightmare.” María struggles to manage the six crying babies as her parents and her husband watch over her shoulder without offering any assistance. María tries to run away, but she is attacked by her wedding dress, then by a giant tortilla with the Aztec calendar emblem, then by a storm of plates. The roles of mother, wife, Mexican, and housekeeper are positioned as impossibly large and overpowering. Her parents and husband chant, “Martyr!” at her as she tries to escape the weight of her various roles.

As the chaos of the scene overwhelms her, María rejects the roles being forced upon her, shattering dishes and using tortillas as weapons. “I hate all

housework because it offends me as a woman! (*There is a piercing moment of silence.*) That's right. I am a woman ... a real woman of flesh and blood. This is not the life I want to live; I want more!" (137-138) As her tirade ends, María is dragged off to court, where she "is being accused by her husband of rebellion toward her implied duties of marriage" (138). María is not permitted to speak on her own behalf, and the jury consists of "women, Mexican, traditional ... They can't possibly be objective" (138). Here, again, María faces the mismatch between the traditional expectations of woman- and motherhood and the American Dream she has been told she can pursue. Due to her enforced lack of voice in the courtroom, she can only listen as her parents describe her rejection of their expectations. She is judged guilty and must watch as her mother weeps in disappointment.

Her mother's crying carries through the transition in the final scene, Scene Twelve. Maria awakens from her dream to hear her mother crying. Carmen confronts Ricardo over the affair he is having with a neighbor. He attempts to defend himself, but she tells him she knows he has had many affairs. "I knew you were no angel when we ran off together, but I thought you would change. You would change, because you loved me. I love you, Ricardo! But I can no longer go on living like this or I'll be betraying myself and I'll be betraying María" (140). María listens as her mother simultaneously acknowledges her choice to overlook her husband's ongoing infidelities in the past and her refusal to overlook them any longer. It is the final nail in the coffin as far as María is concerned. She sees that her parents are asking her to live a

life that has led her mother to be miserable and angry in the face of her father's infidelity, but has left her mother with few alternatives apart from suffering in silence. Instead of accepting that fate, she leaves.

*(GIRL 3 hands MARÍA a piece of paper and a pen.)*

MARÍA: "Dear Mamá and Papá. Last night I heard everything. Now I know that your idea of life is not for me – so I am leaving. I want to create a world of my own. One that combines the best of me. I won't forget the values of my roots, but I want to get the best from this land of opportunities. I am going to college and I will struggle to do something with my life. You taught me everything I needed to know. Goodbye."

GIRL 1: Los quiero mucho. Nunca los olvidaré.

GIRL 2: Mexico is in my blood ...

GIRL 3: And America is in my heart. (141)

The play ends with this letter from María to her parents. In it, she acknowledges their fear that she will reject her Mexican-ness in her effort to be American and promises that instead, she will combine "the best of me." López is not completely rejecting traditions and cultural expectations of Chicana womanhood; instead, she acknowledges the advantages she has been given by her family's love and concern for her, and uses those tools to forge a new path. This is reminiscent of Anzaldúa's creation of a New Mestiza Consciousness, one that is neither simply Mexican nor simply American but that straddles the border between the two, embracing both.

Of the play's conclusion, Alicia Arrizon writes, "The subject formation involves a construction in which understanding one's self in relation to the other is central; the other represents the dominant culture" (Arrizon, *Latina Performance* 124). After considering and rejecting the dominant cultural myths of woman- and motherhood available to her, María decides that she does not have to be either a virtuous, obedient, traditional Guadalupe or an evil, promiscuous Malinche who rejects her heritage. She can embrace tradition without allowing tradition to define her, and she can carry her roots with her into a life she defines for herself. She can be both a good Mexican daughter and an empowered American woman.

#### **4.5 MY VISITS WITH MGM: HYBRID ARCHETYPES**

In *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*, first produced in 1989 by the Hispanic Playwrights Project and published in 1992 in *Shattering the Myth*, Edit Villareal takes a different approach to the exploration of Chicana identity. Like *Simply María*, the play operates from the perspective of a young Chicana, coming of age and trying to form her identity in the space between two worlds. Unlike *Simply María*, however, *My Visits with MGM* offers the protagonist both a positive and a negative role model for creating a life that accommodates a bordered existence.

*My Visits with MGM* takes place largely in memory, which means that, rather than watching a young Chicana struggle to find her identity as we saw

in *Simply María*, we watch a woman in the middle of her life, recounting her youth and tracing the path she has taken to get to the present. The play offers a more mature perspective on Chicana identity formation and motherhood than does *Simply María*. Structurally, *My Visits with MGM* is less indebted to the *acto* than is *Simply María*. Its memorial perspective means its scenes have a grounding in reality, and events tend to have logical connections and clear causality. It is less broadly comic, and the humor in the play comes from the characters, rather than the situations. Like *Simply María*, however, it is highly presentational. The main character, Marta Feliz, acts as narrator, often providing commentary to the audience from within the action of the scene.

Marta Feliz begins the play standing in the “burnt-out shell of a house.” The house once belonged to Marta Feliz’s grandmother, Marta Grande. Over the next few scenes, the audience learns that Marta Grande raised Marta Feliz after the latter’s father died and her mother, Marta Chica, left her behind. Over the course of the play, Villareal creates a picture for the audience of the character of Marta Grande and her wise and caring influence over her granddaughter – an influence that continues even beyond her death.

Along with Marta Feliz and Marta Grande, the other major character in the play is Marta Grande’s sister, Florinda. As much as Marta Grande presents a positive role model for Marta Feliz, Florinda presents a negative one. The sisters, we learn, left Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. Marta Grande decided to cross the border and tried to bring her parents and siblings with her, but only Florinda would come. In Act One, Scene One, Marta Feliz says,



“It’s possible my grandmother ruined Florinda’s life when she made her leave Mexico” (152). Unlike Marta Grande, who successfully navigates the transition from Mexico to the United States and builds a life and family for herself that accommodate both her Mexican heritage and her present in the United States, Florinda clings to religion frantically, unable to ground herself. Throughout the play, her increasingly fanatical behavior is a point of both amusement and genuine frustration for her sister and her niece.

Early in the play, Marta Feliz explains that her name should have been Marta Crisis, but Marta Grande tells her she doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

MARTA FELIZ: *[Aside]* I was an orphan in one sense ... But my grandmother always told me I was a special kind of orphan.

MARTA GRANDE: You have two mothers.

MARTA FELIZ: *[Aside]* She had a way of turning anything bad, orphanhood, even the Revolution, into something better. (153-154)

Marta Feliz actually has three mothers: the absent Marta Chica, Marta Grande, and Florinda. By the end of the first act, Marta Feliz herself is also a mother, giving the play a total of four maternal figures. If we map maternal archetypes onto the mothers in this play, Florinda can be paired to Guadalupe; Marta Grande and, in Act Two, Marta Feliz are analogs for Malinche; and Marta Chica shares traits with Llorona.

Marta Chica, who never speaks, but appears instead as a ghostly figure in her nursing uniform, does little to contribute to Marta Feliz’s identity

formation. Her primary influence is in her absence; her daughter defines herself as an orphan, even though her mother is still alive and in contact with her grandmother. The absent mother in this play is not, however, a figure to be hated or resented. Through her abandonment, Marta Feliz gains the advantage of being raised by her steady, wise grandmother instead of living through the challenges of her mother's often sad and unstable existence. Marta Grande reminds Marta Feliz frequently that her mother did not want to leave her behind and that her mother has had a difficult life.

MARTA GRANDE: Qué lástima. Her husbands, they die.

MARTA FELIZ: I guess she hasn't had too many good breaks, huh?

...

MARTA GRANDE: Your mother always wanted you to be with her, Marta Feliz. Pero sometimes—¿sabes?—we have no choice. Like your mother and her husbands. La Muerte comes when he wants to come. And we have no choice, Marta Feliz, we have no choice.

(161)

Marta Grande, at least, excuses Marta Chica's abandonment of her daughter by determining that choice was not a factor in her action. This forgiving interpretation of events is passed on to Marta Feliz, who can see her mother as an angelic nurse figure instead of as an evil figure who sacrifices her child for the sake of a man.

Florinda is the figure through which Villareal launches her critique of the Catholic Church. She is pious, chaste, and devout, as well as being completely

obsessed with religion. In the first act, we learn that she, along with Marta Grande, converted from Methodist to Baptist in order to gain passage to Texas from Mexico. Later, she joined the Pentacostals.

MARTA GRANDE: Your tía, Marta Feliz, was always looking for a macho god.

MARTA FELIZ: One of those primitive types who has answers for everything and leaves nothing to choice. Especially yours.

FLORINDA: (*Tight lipped.*) Bueno.

MARTA FELIZ: But Florinda was not happy as a Holy Roller either. Living in the United States convinced her that here voodoo was necessary. Magic spells and potions. (151)

By the end of the first act, Florinda has converted once again, to Catholicism, though she continues to include voodoo and magic in her religion, as is typical of Mexican and Chicano Catholicism. Her link to Guadalupe is both metaphorical and literal within the play. She carries statues of the Virgin Mary with her and fills the home with religious icons. Her fear of sin is all-consuming, and she considers herself the arbiter of morality and culture in the family, having never truly left her Mexican roots behind her. Even as her sister is dying, Florinda can only pass judgment.

MARTA GRANDE: ... ¡Ay! Florinda, did I eat something bad? Did I sleep on the wrong side of the bed?

FLORINDA: You lost God. That's what you did.

MARTA GRANDE: ¡Pos, no, Florinda!

FLORINDA: ¡Pos, sí, Marta! You disgraced him with your bad words. Your maldiciones.

...

MARTA GRANDE: Pero, si me muero, Florinda ... (*Revealing a floral print dress made of light material*) ... if I die, bury me in this dress. (*Pause.*) You like it?

...

FLORINDA: You haven't even hemmed it. And the top is too low. Te van a ver tus chi chis aplastadas.<sup>3</sup> (176)

In the second act, after Marta Grande's death, Florinda becomes so consumed with the belief that her sister's house should be hers that she performs voodoo rituals and curses Marta Feliz. Ironically, she professes to want the house for her work with the poor. Marta Feliz's objection, "But tía, I am the poor" (188), does not move Florinda, whose obsession with her status as a martyr is all-encompassing.

Unlike Florinda, whose focus is mainly on propriety, Marta Grande is committed to practicality. Even her attachment to religion is practical rather than spiritual. She became a Baptist in order to get out of Mexico, and she remains Baptist out of loyalty to the people who brought her to Texas. She even requires her fiancé to convert before she will marry him, because "they brought me here to Tejas" (153). Later, when Marta Feliz is a young girl, Marta Grande tells her a story about the moon, calling it "God's window." Marta Feliz explains

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<sup>3</sup> "They'll be able to see your flat boobs." - My translation.

that at school, she is told that the moon is made of cheese, or that the moon is a face of an unhappy man.

MARTA FELIZ: One time I asked her about God, if she thought he really existed.

MARTA GRANDE: Pos, m'ija ...

MARTA FELIZ: Yes, 'Amá?

MARTA GRANDE: You see what you want to see. If you want God, you see God. If you want cheese, you see cheese. ¿Qué no?

MARTA FELIZ: Always practical. (167)

The play is full of examples of Marta Grande's down-to-earth humor, advice and opinions. Her practicality extends from religion to matters of economics, language, and gender equality, as well. Throughout the play, her chickens are as closely connected with her as religious icons are with Florinda. When Marta Feliz tells her grandmother that she wants to get married and have her husband support her, Marta Grande advises her that she "better have some chickens" (168). Marta Feliz laughs off the suggestion, but Marta Grande is adamant.

MARTA GRANDE: If you want to work with the men, m'ija, do it. If you want to stay home with your kids, do it. But whatever you do, you need chickens. Because with chickens, you always have something to sell. From hens you get eggs. From eggs you get chickens. Sell the eggs, and when the chickens get old, sell the

pinche chickens ... You buy, you sell, and you never tell anyone how much money you have.

MARTA FELIZ: How American can you get?

...

MARTA FELIZ: My grandmother, a ranch girl from Nuevo León, Mexico, independently discovered laissez-faire economics and state-of-the-art feminism all by herself. When I was older, I learned her other major theory of life. The “Fifty-Fifty” between the sexes. It was so important to her, I think it was her religion. (169)

Marta Grande rebels in her speech as well. She curses so much that Marta Feliz asks her if all of the people in Mexico curse as much as she does (“Only the women” [160]). She is neither virginal nor particularly concerned with sin. Marta Grande’s lack of concern for propriety positions her as Florinda’s foil. Florinda’s responses to Marta Grande’s behavior and advice are predictable and often comically dramatic. Marta Grande takes her sister’s criticism with good humor and ever-present practicality; occasionally, she even seems to be deliberately baiting her passionate sister. Importantly, however, Marta Grande does not actively struggle through the play to balance her Mexican self with her United States self. Her transculturation appears effortless from the point of view of her granddaughter. Marta Grande simply exists in the space between two worlds without difficulty.

When Marta Feliz comes of age at the end of the first act—a moment marked by her becoming a mother and eloping—Marta Grande’s role in the

play shifts. Marta Grande becomes ill and dies, leaving Marta Feliz to take her place as the Malinche in the story. Marta Grande remains, a ghost, as a constant source of advice and perspective for Marta Feliz through the rest of the play. Marta Feliz's womanhood gives Villareal an opportunity to deal more directly with the issue of sexuality and the Malinche archetype. Marta Grande's relationship with the word "*chingado/a*" was entirely superficial – she was never bashful about using it when it served her, but she could not be accused of embodying it. Marta Feliz, on the other hand, with her three sons to three different husbands, embodies the kind of sexual freedom which Chicano culture condemns for women and which might lead a woman to be labeled "*la chingada*."

In the second act, Villareal positions Guadalupe and Malinche in direct conflict on stage. Marta Feliz does not share her grandmother's guilt over Florinda's madness, nor does she have her grandmother's patience. Even though Marta Grande left her house to Marta Feliz, Florinda decides that it should be hers, and she employs wide-ranging tactics to maintain her hold on it. Because Marta Grande's will cannot be found, Florinda launches a legal battle to gain ownership of the house, leveraging the connections she has fostered within the Church in order to manipulate the legal system. Marta Feliz, lacking either money or connections, is ultimately powerless to hold onto the home her grandmother left to her. Once Marta Feliz loses the house, however, she moves to Los Angeles, where she earns her Bachelor's degree and works with Father Ernesto to help the poor.

Through these four characters, Villareal thoroughly undermines interpretations of the Guadalupe, Malinche, and Llorona archetypes. Although she is the Guadalupe figure in the play, Florinda is the terrible, and eventually evil, mother. Her selfishness and cruelty lead her to inflict harm upon her grand-niece. Marta Grande, as Malinche, is the powerful and wise earth mother, not the selfish and sexualized mother who rejects her heritage for her own advantage. Even Marta Feliz, who more closely matches the archetype of Malinche in her lifestyle, is a strong and selfless mother who ends the play working alongside the Catholic Father Ernesto to improve the lives of poor Chicanos in the barrio. And Marta Chica, the ghostly Llorona figure, gives her child a better life by abandoning her.

The play is, ultimately, about coming-of-age, much as *Simply María* and *The Fat-Free Chicana* (see below) are. In this play, however, the protagonist, Marta Feliz, has a powerful and successful, if unexpected, role model who guides her through the experience of transculturation.

... if women are the traditional bearers, transmitters, and preservers of culture, in Latina plays such as *My Visits with MGM* ... those roles are reconfigured and negotiated in apprenticeships typical of the *bildungsroman*. In this process, those roles that are considered negative, stereotypical, and demeaning are reappropriated and reimagined with a new appreciation made possible by the protagonists' initiation into a transcultural state of mind and into a political agenda that Gloria Anzaldúa has called



the 'new mestiza consciousness.'(Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach  
70)

Marta Grande does not, on the surface, look much like the “New Mestiza.” She is old, uneducated, and a first-generation immigrant. She is wife and mother and chicken keeper. Her domain is the home, and she is happy in it.

Nonetheless, she understands the forces at work in her granddaughter’s life and remains a grounding force as the young woman struggles to bring her Mexican private life and her Anglo public life into balance with one another. As the six-year-old Marta Felix shows off how well she is learning English in school, she and Marta Grande fight over the value of being bilingual.

MARTA FELIZ: Why don’t you speak English? Like everybody else?

MARTA GRANDE: I understand todo. All the English.

MARTA FELIZ: But you don’t speak it. I SAID I DON’T WANT TO  
BE LIKE YOU, ‘Amá.

MARTA GRANDE: ¿Qué dices, m’ija?

MARTA FELIZ: (*To audience.*) That day, my grandmother was mean to me, the only time in her life.

MARTA GRANDE: Somos gente especial, Marta Feliz. We are special people. We speak two languages. Two! ¡Dos! And as long as you live in this house, don’t you ever forget it! (166)

Even as she grows into a woman, navigating life on the border, Marta Feliz continues to rely on Marta Grande for guidance. Thanks to the balanced,

constant source of love and support she finds in her unconventional and decidedly not-at-all-Guadalupean grandmother, Marta Feliz is able to endure the crises of her life and use them to build a life that holds true to her own unique strengths and values, one that encompasses both her heritage and her ambitions.

#### **4.6 THE FAT-FREE CHICANA: TONANTZÍN/GUADALUPE AS THE VOICE OF TRADITION**

So far in this chapter, I have explored a Chicana's coming-of-age by contesting the limited constructions of womanhood from both US and Mexican cultural perspectives—in *Simply María, or the American Dream*—and by embracing the lessons of positive and negative transcultural role models—in *My Visits with MGM (My Grandmother Marta)*. In both cases, one of the protagonist's goals was to gain a college education. Higher education in these and other Chicana plays is viewed as key to the development of the New Mestiza.

Often in the protagonist's quest for education in the public sphere, she brings new knowledge back to the home to share with her family or community. In this way, the learning process extends from the individual to the collective via the female protagonist, within the context of transculturation. (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach 71)

In Elaine Romero's *The Fat-Free Chicana and the Snow Cap Queen*, which premiered in 1995 and was not published until 2000, however, the positive value of a college education is not immediately certain. Like many Chicanas of her generation, the play's protagonist, Amy, is the first of her family to go to college. The immediate effect of her education, however, is to separate her from her roots, confirming the anxieties expressed by María's parents in *Simply María*. Amy appears to have, in fact, stopped being Mexican, rejecting her own heritage in favor of a white, middle-class worldview. By casting aside the traditions (figured as food) of her culture, she becomes linked to the Malinche archetype as a sell-out who has turned her back on her family and the Chicano Nation.

The action of the play centers on Amy's attempts to force her mother to serve healthy Mexican food at her restaurant. Amy, the educated Chicana, embraces the education she has gained at the hands of White America and attempts to convince her Mexican family of the superiority of her new knowledge. The play portrays Amy and her family's struggle to find balance with regard to food in parallel with Amy's struggle to find balance in her own identity. Food in the play is a metaphor for culture; Amy's rejection of traditional Mexican food equates to her rejection of her culture, and Mami's intransigence about her cooking methods equates to an inability to cope with change. The key to the play is hybridity; when the characters find a balance between old and new, the family and the community benefit.

Over the course of the play, Amy must contend with two supernatural characters who use their powers to thwart her efforts to find a balance between her fat-free menu and her mother's lard-focused one. Importantly, the two characters are played by the same actress, emphasizing their similarities in spite of their opposite positions. Doña Norte (North), according to the stage directions, "looks like La Conquistadora, the Virgin of Santa Fe, New Mexico." La Conquistadora<sup>4</sup> is a statue of the Virgin Mary who became the patroness of Santa Fe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Hers is a story of colonization and valorization of white over indigenous history, and so it is fitting that she represents the Anglo-American influences on Amy's identity formation. The Mexican influences are embodied by the Snow Cap Queen (Snow). With this character, Romero undercuts the Guadalupe type by identifying her with the spokeswoman for a popular brand of lard, thereby equating Mexican culture with the lard Amy's mother uses to cook everything.

Snow appears, clothed in white and blue. When Amy's mother first sees her, she believes she is seeing the Virgin of Guadalupe. "María. Ave María." The reverence Mami shows for the Snow Cap Queen is reverence both for traditional womanhood and traditional cooking. Snow is a

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<sup>4</sup> In the Catholic version of the history, the Pueblo Indians invaded Santa Fe, forcing the Spanish to flee with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the statue of La Conquistadora, rescued from a burning church. Twelve years later, the Spanish leader Don Diego de Vargas managed, without bloodshed, to convince the Indians to surrender the city to the Spanish again. The grateful Spanish gathered their belongings and headed back to Santa Fe. Unfortunately, by the time they got there, it was winter and the Pueblo people would not let them into the city. With his people freezing and without shelter, Don Diego had no choice but to attack the city. The Spanish, though outnumbered, prevailed, thanks (according to them) to the intervention of La Conquistadora. (Chavez, Angelico 69-80)

Guadalupe/Tonantzín stand-in, representing the pure extreme of “ideal Mexican woman.” But, like North, who manipulates Amy by giving her money, shaming her for backing down, and finally by threatening her mother’s life, Snow fights dirty; both of these figures lack the selflessness and piety that are typically associated with Guadalupe and La Conquistadora.

In the play, Romero emphasizes Amy’s distance from her homeland and her heritage immediately; Amy attends college in Idaho, and the play opens with Amy, shivering in the snow. North, who identifies herself to Amy as the Good Witch of the North, convinces her to take her new knowledge of dietetics back to her home and family.

NORTH: Go home and make your fat-free dreams come true.

AMY: My fat-free dreams?

NORTH: Change your mami’s restaurant. Create a new healthier menu. (92)

Convinced that she is doing what’s best for her family, Amy decides to go home. The scene shifts abruptly and dramatically, from snowy Idaho to an adobe building in New Mexico that remains the setting for the rest of the play.

Even before Amy arrives, Romero tells the audience that something is not right with the family that inhabits this space. Amy’s sister, Silvia is obsessed with exercise and eats only lettuce.

ABUELO: Where’s Silvia? She was gonna jog next to me on the way downtown.

MAMI: She’s probably warming up with a twenty-mile run.

ABUELO: I wish she'd come home.

MAMI: Put some lettuce out on the front stairs again. That brought her home last time. (93)

Silvia's extreme behavior around eating and exercising marks a crisis of identity similar to her sister's. Lacking a sense of her place in the family, Silvia focuses her energy on self-control. She has not consciously rejected Chicano culture, but she is unable to take in the sustenance provided by that culture. Her relationship to food and exercise tells the audience that she has joined the "health food culture" popular in the United States at the time, but, unlike Amy, she is still geographically and ideologically connected with her family. The mismatch between her relationship to food and her relationship to family endangers Silvia's physical and mental health throughout the play. Meanwhile, in contrast to Silvia's obsessive exercise, Abuelo uses a riding mower as his sole means of transportation throughout the play.

Amy arrives and is greeted with anxiety from her mother, who immediately notices that she has gotten thin at college. Fueled by her exchange with North, Amy is sarcastic and even cruel to her mother as she attempts to share what she has learned about healthy eating. She wields the obituary section of the newspaper as evidence that the Mexican diet is killing their people, implying that her mother is complicit in the deaths of her people because she serves them unhealthy food; her approach leaves her mother in tears. Mami tells her, "Words can break my heart," to which Amy can only reply, "Can't anybody change around here? I don't know why it's such a big

deal” (95). This exchange further emphasizes Amy’s removal from her heritage and her culture. She has so thoroughly separated herself that she cannot recognize the deep impact of her dispassionate criticism of her mother’s food. It is at this point that Snow first appears, offering to help Mami with Amy. Mami defends Amy, but Snow reinforces Mami’s conviction to continue cooking the way she has always cooked, particularly in the face of competition from a new Mexican restaurant across the street.

Amy’s rejection of her roots is further emphasized when her cousin Rumaldo arrives. A passionate Chicano artist, he enters carrying a huge new graffiti art sign for the restaurant.

RUMALDO: Amy, you’re home. Come here and hug your favorite cousin.

*(RUMALDO reaches out to hug AMY. She doesn’t respond.)*

*RUMALDO looks devastated.)*

AMY: *(Pointing to RUMALDO’s sign)* What’s that?

RUMALDO: It’s the latest. It’s called graffiti art.

AMY: *(Looking at sign.)* While you’re at it, you might as well change that sign. Call the place something new. Call it “The Heart Attack Café.”

*(AMY slams the door. RUMALDO still has his arms outstretched for her to hug him.) (99-100)*

This exchange makes clear that Amy’s relationship with Rumaldo was once a close one. As the play progresses, we learn that Rumaldo and Amy grew up

together as friends. They once shared a passion for Chicana/o history and political action, and Amy went to college with the intention of majoring in Chicano history and joining MEChA. When Rumaldo asks her about MEChA, she pushes his interest aside, “I have other interests than being a professional Mexican” (121). Just as Amy’s rejection of her Mexican self has broken her mother’s heart, so too has it broken her relationship with her cousin. She is even incapable of appreciating his artwork, seeing it instead through the eyes of the Just Say No to Graffiti Committee, which threatens to fine Mami for allowing him to hang his sign. In Rumaldo, however, we are able to see glimpses of the kind of person Amy was before she set aside her Mexican self. These glimpses offer hope that this play’s Malinche figure can be redeemed through transculturation.

Amy’s journey towards a successful incorporation of both the Anglo and the Mexican aspects of her identity is represented in the food she creates and works with through the play. Left in charge of the restaurant early on, Amy replaces her mother’s pre-made food with fat-free substitutes. Snow catches her in the act and curses the food.

SNOW: I curse every meal you make with your little college girl hands. May your customers gag and have strong cravings for a little gristle for their meat, good wholesome saturated fat in their cheese, and most of all, Manteca – All-American, South American lard dripping through their veins.



AMY: You don't scare me, you evil little witch of the south. Bruja del sur.

SNOW: And may this curse, which I have drummed up in defense of la cultura, la raza, remain in full effect until you have a change of heart, m'jita of the big ideas and grand schemes. (104)

Though Amy denies that she will ever have a change of heart, things begin to change for her almost immediately. She serves her fat-free food to a lawyer and a food critic (Snow in disguise), poisoning them. She also poisons Silvia by serving her lettuce washed in contaminated tap water. As a result of Amy's decision to reject completely the traditions and food she was born into, the restaurant is closed down and Mami is arrested. Silvia reveals that Snow came to her in a vision and told her that she has to stop eating lettuce and start eating Mexican food in order to heal herself. For Amy, rejection of culture creates a financial and familial crisis. For Silvia, it has created a physical one.

As Act Two opens, Amy decides to trick Snow into believing she has had the required change of heart. She does this by making an offering of the taco meat from commercially-made tacos. She attempts to feign a connection to her culture, but she chooses "fake" Mexican food, marking her effort as fake, as well. Unfooled, Snow challenges Amy to eat the greasy meat, and Amy cannot force herself to comply. Silvia, who has gone from eating only lettuce to "eating everything except people and small animals" (116), is rewarded with curative herbs to bring back her menstrual cycle. In this scene, Romero highlights the contrast between the cold and calculating Amy and the passionate and earthy

Silvia, a distinction that did not exist in the first act. Still, both of the young women demonstrate extremes of a position, and no resolution can be reached until they both find balance.

Later in the act, Mami is released from jail on a technicality (“MAMI: They forgot to read me my rights. RUMALDO: They’re always trying to forget our rights” [124]), and Amy’s distance from her heritage becomes increasingly clear as she begins to argue against her family on behalf of the white power structure. In resignation, Amy agrees to go into the restaurant and cook with her mother and sister, using her mother’s methods. North appears and chastises Amy for backing down from her goal. Amy tries to defend herself by telling North that “those ideas don’t work down here. They don’t work in action” (127). North responds by raising the stakes.

NORTH: Your mother is dying and you know how to save her.

AMY: (*Alarmed.*) What?

NORTH: (*Pointing at SILVIA.*) When I lift my wand, your mother’s heart will stop. But you can change all that ... if you’ll only try.

(121)

Amy’s mother has a heart attack, Silvia continues to eat everything in sight, and Rumaldo continues his battle over the restaurant sign. As Amy tries to keep the restaurant running, Snow appears again and covers the building with lard, turning traditional Mexican food and culture into a physical force that traps Silvia and Rumoldo and leaves Amy alone. Using the apparently opposing but ultimately coordinated forces of Snow and North, Romero positions Amy at

the center of a battle between the heritage she has abandoned and the culture she has assimilated into. In order to resolve the crisis, Amy must find a way to integrate both that which she has learned and that which she used to know.

Ultimately, North advises Amy that she has to feed her low-fat food to Mami in order to save her life. North releases Silvia and Rumaldo from the lard, but she warns Amy that she is still on her own. She must create healthy food for her mother, she cannot tell anyone else what she is trying to do, and, “She has to like them. She has to decide they’re what she wants. And when she does that, we’ll see what we can do about reversing it” (137). Mami demands tamales, and Amy prepares the ingredients for a low-fat variation, but Snow attempts one last time to subvert her efforts by convincing Silvia to serve a traditional, lard-soaked tamale to her mother. The action of the scene reaches a climax as Amy, lacking a tamale, contends with rising panic and finally comes up with a solution.

AMY: There’s a folk tale from the Andes about a woman who’s as evil as La Llorona on a bad day and as nice as the Virgin Mary on a worse one ... Sometimes you look down and she’s got goat’s feet or chicken’s feet, and other times, she’s got a halo around her head.

*(SNOW appears, approaches RUMALDO, misses hitting him when he steps away. She falls and bangs her head against the wall.)*

AMY: She cursed this place, but some curses can be lifted without that La Lloronita’s presence. She can be locked up if you say the

right words, in the right sequence. Rumaldo, you know the poem.  
It's written in your Chicano heart.

RUMALDO: Lady, lady, dressed in blue/May God call you  
something other than you./May the devil know you hoard/his little  
evil devil claws./May God shine on you and bring to be/the Virgin  
Mary inside of me. (141)

This exorcism defeats Snow, and the now-healthy Mami invites Amy to help her develop “an agreement” about “this fat thing” (141-142). By summoning the Chicano heart of her family, Amy is able to banish the dysfunctional extremes of Snow and North and instead reach a compromise with her *familia*. As the play closes, the entire family has come into balance. Silvia's eating disorder has been resolved, Mami's restaurant is clearly flourishing, and Rumaldo has made new signs to reflect the new menu, reading, “Order from Our Original-Style or Third-Generation Menu,” and “Low-Fat Food Available Here.” Amy, having resolved her crisis of identity, has embraced her New Mestiza Consciousness; she has decided to transfer to a university closer to home, join MEChA, and change her major.

Demonstrating the growing maturity of Chicana playwrighting in the 1990s, Romero's play grapples more broadly with issues of race and tradition in the borderlands, rather than limiting itself to the coming-of-age of a single protagonist. It also contends with the real (and still relevant) issue of health and the Mexican-American diet. Romero uses humor to address these issues, but her protagonist is not the only character who has to change in order to

bring health to the community; each of the family members must undergo a transformation. Amy must learn to embrace her heritage, Silvia must come to terms with caring for her body and her womanhood; Mami must acknowledge the risks of her “traditional” cooking methods; even Rumaldo must make the transition from young revolutionary to politically-engaged adult. Although it functions as a quasi-morality play, Romero’s work is a far cry from the more didactic approach reflected in *Simply Maria*. Instead, it demonstrates a shift away from the individual focus that characterizes the other plays in this chapter. In its broader focus on the welfare of a community, this play shares a link with the plays I will discuss in Chapter Four.

#### **4.7 CONCLUSION: COMING OF AGE – ON STAGE**

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Chicana playwrights were still quite rare, and the Chicanas they were writing to and about were (or would be) the first women of their families to go to college and the first to have access to the kind of education that provided alternatives to the traditional model of family and motherhood. These young women were in a state of cultural crisis. “The overall pattern which emerges is one in which the educated Chicana becomes increasingly alienated from her culture” (Mirandé and Enríquez 134). Because the Chicana’s role in her family was assumed to be that of mother and caregiver, education was “likely to be seen as unnecessary, superfluous, or even wasteful” (134). Faced with this crisis, the playwrights in this chapter

advocate for education while demonstrating the ways in which education can provide a young Chicana with the skills and knowledge to help her family and her community.

To a great degree, the audience for these plays was defined by the academic and artistic field of Chicano Studies. The playwrights discussed in this chapter were simultaneously writing *to* other young Chicanas like themselves, who needed to understand that they were not alone in their struggle to define themselves on the borderlands, and writing *for* a broader play-going audience. The plays were initially produced in small, regional theatres, and they have continued to be produced mainly in university and, in López's case, community theatres. Jorge Huerta has this to say about the audience for Chicana/o drama:

Mechicana/o audiences have become more educated, more middle class, as the players have become more professional. This is not to say that working-class people do not attend professional Chicana/o productions. From what I have observed in *teatros* and mainstream theatres across the country, Mechicana/os from all walks of life will find their way to a play that addresses their community. (*Performance, Society, and Myth* 187)

The wide-ranging, fantastical plays discussed in this chapter have a distinct personality that defines them as uniquely Chicana and decidedly unlike the plays being produced on Broadway in the same period. The playwrights understood that their audience may not be exclusively Chicana, but that their

ability to communicate the Chicana experience in an accessible and entertaining way was key to their advocacy. By making the alternatives non-threatening and even empowering for both the individual and the community, these playwrights successfully challenged the limitations of traditional constructions of woman- and motherhood.

## **5.0 CHAPTER 4: SUMMONING THE GODDESSES: EMPOWERING THE MOTHER IN LATE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CHICANA PLAYS**

Since 1984, I have seen theater as my chief vehicle for expression and as a potential political catalyst. I turned to theater from poetry when my own single voice as a poet could not incorporate the voices inside me that insisted on being heard—voices with their own tone, rhythm, their own special blend of English, Spanish, Mexican caló, American slang. Ay! They wanted to sing rant rave crave. And I just let 'em come. Having spent the first ten years as a poet and essayist with a fixed relationship to autobiography, it was a great revelation and relief to discover that I was not limited to my own personal biography as a writer, but that a much larger community of people could inhabit me and speak through me: La Raza. - Cherrie Moraga, "Art in America, Con Acento" 157



## 5.1 INTRODUCTION: *INDIGENISMA* AND CHICANA FEMINISM IN THE '90S

In the quote above, Cherrie Moraga, one of the most recognizable Chicana feminist writers, discusses her relationship with theatre as a means to give voice to the cause of La Raza. In her case, the cause of La Raza includes and necessitates the exploration of queer Chicana feminism, and the political focus of her work reflects a familiar thread in Chicana dramaturgy, one that has continued to develop and expand over the past several decades. As we have seen, Chicana plays in the 1980s deployed the *tres madres* and, to a small extent, pre-Columbian figures like Tonantzín, to speak back to the Chicano nationalist movement and protest the limitation of Chicana maternity to virgin and whore. These early dramatic deployments of, and references to, maternal archetypes emphasized Chicana identity formation and attempted to provide a defense and validation for Chicana feminism.

As Chicana playwrights gained more exposure and more training, their works began to take on a broader sense of both history and feminism. This shift also reflected a shift in the focus of Chicana feminism in general. In the early decades of the Chicano movement, Chicana feminists often found themselves in a position of needing to defend Chicana feminism as a productive field of enquiry that did not inherently threaten the strength of the Chicano nationalist movement. Plays reflected the New Mestiza's emergence and emphasized the challenge of a young woman's efforts to live a bordered existence. The early works of *teatropoetas* and Teatro de las Chicanas, as well

as the plays discussed in Chapter Three, focus on elucidating the Chicana's struggle for an audience of Chicanos and Chicanas. That is, these plays and performance works began from an assumption that a Chicana feminist needs to defend herself for being a Chicana feminist, and they illuminate the process of identity formation in order to demonstrate to the audience why Chicana feminism is important. Many of the single-author Chicana plays of the 1980s and early 1990s were set in the present and dealt primarily with an individual's immediate, quotidian concerns. They were also, often, comedies, written in the tradition of the *actos* of El Teatro Campesino. Though they challenged traditional understandings of Chicana identity, they simultaneously reinforced the Chicana's support of the Chicano movement, presenting Chicana feminism as a constructive force in the movement, rather than an alternative to movement ideology.

Gradually, Chicana playwrights began to challenge more insistently both Chicano and white culture. Their plays began to move away from day-to-day concerns in order to look more pointedly to the past and the future; the changing perspective meant taking on *indigenismo/a* as both a theoretical approach and a cultural phenomenon. As this shift occurred, Chicana feminist plays began to explore the expressive capacity of tragedy.

From the early years of the movement, Chicana feminists used indigeneity as a source of validation for their place in the Chicano movement. By claiming and emphasizing their connections to ancient Nahua peoples and goddesses, Chicanas refuted accusations that their feminism made them

traitors to their race. Ancient Mayan and Aztec goddesses are omnipresent in Chicana literature and feminist writings from the beginning of Chicana feminism in the 1960s. By the 1990s, Chicana feminist theorizing had begun a deeper exploration of *indigenismo* and its potential to empower the contemporary Chicana. Theorists and writers like Ana Castillo wrote about Xicanismo, altering the spelling of Chicana to reflect Nahuatl spelling conventions and assert a connection to Amerindian roots. Playwrights like Cherrie Moraga and Josefina López began to move beyond the individually-focused explication of the contemporary Chicana and her bordered identity, choosing instead to explore broader themes, tying history and mythology into explorations of social and economic struggles and Chicana political and environmental activism. Xicana feminists' understanding of themselves as descendants of an indigenous race, whose history and mythology are encoded in the body, forced playwrights to experiment with new approaches to storytelling and performance in order to encompass the vastness of Xicana history and mythology. In doing this, they deepened the exploration and reimagining of the *tres madres* and their Pre-Columbian antecedents on the Chicana stage.

## **5.2 TRAGIC FORMATIONS OF THE MYTHICAL MATERNAL**

Tey Diana Rebellado, discussing contemporary Chicana approaches to mythology, points out

If ... the existing mythology (as defined by patriarchy) is unable to fulfill the increasing demand for women as active, energetic and positive figures, then women writers ... choose myths and archetypes, historical and cultural heroines, that are different from the traditional ones. They may ... choose existing models but imbue them with different (sometimes radically different) traits and characteristics. ("From Coatlicue to La Llorona: Literary Myths and Archetypes" 49)

Unlike the plays in Chapter Three, which challenge the construction of Chicana motherhood mainly by dealing playfully with existing archetypes in order to highlight their inconsistencies, the plays I will discuss in this chapter move beyond comedy and into tragedy. In doing so, they dismantle the available archetypes, providing powerful alternative models of motherhood for the Chicana at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Unconquered Spirits*, first performed in 1995, Josefina López uses La Llorona, Tonantzín, and La Malinche to weave together the stories of an indigenous woman from the time of the conquest and a Chicana worker during the 1938 pecan shellers' strike in Texas. In *The Hungry Woman, A Mexican Medea*, which also premiered in 1995, Moraga uses a wide range of mother figures from indigenous history and mythology, Greek mythology, and Catholicism to imagine a queer Chicana mother in a dystopic, post-U.S. future.

Though I assert that both of the works in this chapter are tragedies, and both trace the downfall of a protagonist or protagonists through each

character's own choices, they do not adhere to Aristotle's formal criteria for tragedy, demonstrating instead the influence of the agit-prop tradition and Brecht's Epic theatre. They are episodic, sometimes without clear causal and temporal links between episodes. The action of *The Hungry Woman* takes place in an imagined future, and events occur in Medea's past and present.

*Unconquered Spirits* moves from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> and back again. The plays employ spectacle freely and embrace their own theatricality. Their aim is to challenge the assumptions of their audience and, because of this, they do not focus on the experience of a single tragic figure, attending instead to the larger social picture within which the protagonist(s) is/are situated.

Instead of being purely either Aristotelian tragedies or Brechtian epic plays, both *Unconquered Spirits* and *The Hungry Woman* fit more closely into the category of socially critical tragedy, bridging the perceived gap between Aristotle's definition of tragedy and Brecht's later criticism of it. Raymond Williams describes the "division of experience into social and personal categories," as "the deepest crisis in modern literature" (Williams, 121). Socially critical tragedy erases this division. Williams goes on to say that

Tragedy, inevitably, has been shaped by this division. There is social tragedy: men destroyed by power and famine; a civilization destroyed or destroying itself. And then there is personal tragedy: men and women suffering and destroyed in their closest relationships; the individual knowing his destiny, in a cold

universe, in which death and an ultimate spiritual isolation are alternative forms of the same suffering and heroism. (121)

The division, for Williams, is unnecessary and even damaging. Tragedy can, and should, contain both the personal and the social. This approach is reflected in both *Unconquered Spirits* and *The Hungry Woman*. Rather than focusing solely on the experience of their protagonists, both López and Moraga link the personal to the political by emphasizing the interrelation of personal and social tragedies.

### **5.3 WEEPING AND FIGHTING: LLORONA, MALINCHE, AND TONANTZÍN AS REDEMPTION IN *UNCONQUERED SPIRITS***

In the introduction to the 1997 print version of *Unconquered Spirits*, Josefina López asserts her own feminist position on the history she confronts in the play.

Women and their bodies have always been the battlefield on which personal and political wars (rape) are fought. Women represent a man's most valued 'possession,' therefore her body also represents the prize, thus making her the loser.

No matter who wins the battle, women will always lose (i.e. rape, impregnation, or loss of children). And since she is always the 'loser,' 'her-story' is never told. History is therefore devoid of 'her' experience, 'her' point of view, and 'her-story.' It's as if all these

men who have discovered, created, and destroyed, through history had no mother ... Women are not included in history, are not given credit, and worst of all we are blamed for so many things. (4-5)

The introduction reveals López's feminism, certainly; it also points to a concern with more than inequality between the sexes – López objects in particular to disregard and even denigration of the mother in *history*. She closes the introduction with a dedication to

my 'mother,' which is Mexico. I wrote this play for Mexico and for my great-great-great- ... 'grandmother' who was Aztec and was raped by the Spaniards. I am recognizing her and accepting her because she is just as important as my Spanish great-great-great- ... 'grandfather.' (6)

Ten years after *Simply María*, López maintains her Chicana feminism, but her focus has shifted from the individual challenges of a young woman defining her Chicana identity to the centuries-long history of rape and exploitation of “brown” (indigenous and Chicana) women at the hands of white men.

Formally, *Unconquered Spirits* shares some structural elements with *Simply María*. It is characterized by many short scenes and a great deal of rapid dialogue, and it moves energetically through both time and geography. The play is decidedly non-realistic, and López leverages the expressivity of the dramatic form in her storytelling, carefully constructing the visual and performative impact of her story.

Originally produced in 1995 at California State University, Northridge, *Unconquered Spirits* tells the story of the conquest, rape, and personal sacrifice of two young women living nearly four centuries apart. The young women are: Xochitl, an indigenous woman living in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, whose conversion to Catholicism is complicated by the resistance efforts of her Aztec community and by her rape at the hands of a Catholic friar; and Xochimilco, a Mexican-American woman living in the late 1930s, whose affair with her white supervisor at the pecan-shelling plant is complicated by the resistance efforts of her fellow workers and by her rape at the hands of her lover. Both women ultimately find themselves embraced and offered protection by the resistance, and both determine that they must make excruciating sacrifices for the good of their children and their culture.

### **5.3.1 FROM MALINCHE TO LLORONA: MOTHERHOOD AND SACRIFICE**

López links the mythical and historical mothers in *Unconquered Spirits* through their tears. They are both the weeping woman: La Llorona. *Unconquered Spirits* complicates the story of La Llorona by offering the weeping woman ample justification for her actions, and conflates Llorona with Malinche in an effort to redeem both characters. The writing of the play was informed, according to López, by both the work of Rudolfo Anaya, who links Malinche to Llorona in *The Legend of La Llorona* (Höller 58) and a historical account of Cortés's approach to conquering the native people of the Americas by breaking their spirits rather than simply through military might (McCulloh). López's efforts in



this play tie Llorona and Malinche to Tonantzín at the moment of the conquest, making them powerful and positive mothers of an unconquered race, rather than allowing them to be the victimized and violent mothers written into *history*.

López evokes La Llorona in the opening moment of the play, as a lone mother appears on stage and calls out into the night for her child. This mother is not a ghost, however, and she has not drowned her children. She is Juana, mother to Xochimilco. In this scene, Xochimilco, at 10 years old, has wandered off in an effort to put off leaving her home for the United States. Xochimilco expresses concern that her father will come home from the revolution to an empty home, and Juana begins to weep. Xochimilco realizes that her father won't be coming home, and she tries to be strong for her mother.

To caution her daughter against wandering off again, Xochimilco's mother tells her the story of La Llorona.

A long time ago, there was a very beautiful Indian woman and a handsome Spaniard who fell in love. They loved each other very much and had children. Then he left her and went off to Spain to marry another woman. When he returned to Mexico the Indian woman went to a big ball and saw them dancing happily together. She was so angry that she went home and killed her children. She cut them into little pieces and threw them into a river. Then she killed herself. But when her spirit reached the gates of heaven, God would not let her in until she found her children. So her spirit

roams the rivers of Mexico, looking for her children, screaming,  
'¡¡Ayy mis hijos!!' (11-12)

Juana's version of the story is overtly rooted in the kind of history that López speaks against in her introduction and provides the uninitiated audience member with a foundation against which the rest of the play responds.

Betrayed, crazy, and violent, La Llorona in the legend conveyed by Juana to her daughter could not be farther from the loving and affectionate mother we have just seen weeping for her lost husband and calling out for her child. And the legend, reproduced through the colonial patriarchy, is nothing like the various weeping mothers we will encounter in the rest of the play.

Almost immediately after Juana tells the story of La Llorona, the scene changes to Tenochtitlán, 1521, the moment of the city's fall. Tonantzín is seen, screaming "from the top of the Pyramid of the Sun as Tenochtitlán is being destroyed ... All around her is chaos" (13). Tonantzín's scream is La Llorona's: "¡¡Ayy mis hijos!!" (13) As Tonantzín is captured and crucified by the Spanish soldiers, the voice of a Bishop can be heard, delivering a sermon in which the Aztec people are told that their conquest was God's will, and that their gods were devils, "who did not support you in the slightest, while the true and omnipotent God has allowed his faithful servants, the Spaniards, to conquer Mexico" (13). In the space of two scenes, López demonstrates both the rhetoric that has been used to keep power away from women and mothers and the rhetoric that has been used to conquer and convert the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The story of La Llorona reinforces the notion that women are

irrationally guided by their emotions and cannot be trusted. The Bishop's sermon reinforces the notion that European Catholicism is superior to Nahua religions and that the indigenous people and their gods and goddesses deserve their fate. Both of these lines of rhetoric work to support the conquest strategy López attributes to Cortés. "If you can convince people they're worthless, that they should suffer because that's what God wants, they will never rise" (McCulloh).

For the rest of Act I, López tells the story of Xochitl. Initially, Xochitl's story calls Malinche to mind. Xochitl is an earnest and compliant student and a willing convert to Catholicism. She has bought into the rhetoric that says she and her people deserved to be conquered and that they can be saved by converting to the Spaniard's religious beliefs. She attempts to help the members of her community learn the correct prayers as they all prepare to be baptized, because she genuinely appears to believe that conversion and compliance are the best choices for her people. She even prays to the Catholic God to care for the souls of the Indians who have been killed in the conquest. When another Indian, Texcoco, attempts to challenge her ready acceptance of the Spaniards' beliefs, he raises questions she cannot answer, but cannot break her resolve. She goes to the church to pray over her questions and encounters one of the Spanish Friars, who, rather than providing her with spiritual guidance, rapes her.

FRAY FRANCISCO: It is because we are here to suffer. Only when we suffer do we prove to God how worthy we are of his paradise.

Your people need to suffer, to repent for all of your sins, for all your human sacrifices and worship of false gods. Only after you have suffered on earth can you truly deserve to enter through the gates of heaven. Do you want to be saved? (*XOCHITL nods “yes” as she looks sadly to her feet.*) Then you must suffer. (*His hand is now between her legs, rubbing on her. XOCHITL holds back her tears. She passively and defenselessly awaits his other hand. He puts his hand in her blouse and she does nothing. Blackout.*) (21)

Here, we see the rhetoric of the Catholic Church deployed to overpower the spirit and the body of an indigenous woman. Fray Francisco is simultaneously justifying his actions and telling Xochitl that she will be rewarded for surrendering her spirit up to him.

In the next scene, under a full moon that “has a face, that of a crying woman” (21), Xochitl weeps for her lost innocence. Gradually, it becomes evident to her and to the audience that she is wounded both by the sexual abuse she has suffered and by the spiritual assault that made her believe she had no choice but to acquiesce. “But I let him! ... I laid on the ground, looking up at the cross. And I kept thinking that if ... if I endured, that the Lord would love me more” (23). The recognition that she has been convinced to accept her own victimization is both painful and transformative for Xochitl. She decides she is unwilling to remain subject to the domination of the Spaniards. With the help of other Indians, she resists the conquest of her, and her people’s, spirit. She accepts the task of planting a statue of the Aztec god, Tlaloc, on the altar

before the baptism ceremony, enabling the Indians to go through the motions of the Catholic baptism while secretly declaring their faith and devotion to their own gods. In this move, she attempts to avoid either martyrdom or hypocrisy, but her deception sets in motion the events that will lead to her death. When the icons are discovered by the friars, their initial response is righteous indignation, but when they realize that the statues of Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl, and Tonantzín that were planted on the altar are made of solid gold, their response shifts to naked greed. López undercuts Fray Francisco's professed piety throughout this act, but his counterpart, Fray Bartolome, until this point, appears genuinely to believe that his motives are pure and his means just. Both friars destroy the church's altar in their frenzy to search for more hidden gold. The scene ends as Fray Bartolome says, "There must be more where these came from," and Fray Francisco responds, "I think I know who is responsible ... Go call the soldiers and follow me" (31). The friars are not even attempting to pretend that they are guided by religious motives in seeking out the perpetrators. They want more gold.

In the next scene, a pregnant Xochitl goes into labor. Texcoco leaves to get the midwife and returns immediately to tell her that the Spaniards who have been hunting them have found them, and she must run away. She flees, and he remains behind and is captured and tortured. López intricately juxtaposes Xochitl's labor with Texcoco's torture and the birth of her twin children with his death. Xochitl and Texcoco's screams of pain overlap, and the Nahua balance is upheld in the cycle of life and death.

The midwife comments on the babies' whiteness. Xochitl weeps, and the midwife reassures her, highlighting Xochitl as representative of the women of her culture in this historical moment. "There's no need to be ashamed. So many of our hermanas have had the same thing happen to them. No matter who wins the battles ... we always lose" (33). Xochitl, now the mother of two mestizo children, gets the news of Texcoco's death and summons the strength to continue her escape. Dressed in white, but covered in blood, she gathers her newborn sons and flees again. She refuses to leave her children with the midwife, saying, "I don't want them to find my children and baptize them" (34). Xochitl refuses to surrender her spirit or the spirits of her children to the conquerors, and so she runs, again under the full moon with the face of a crying woman, until she reaches a lake. There, rather than risk their being indoctrinated by the Catholic Church, she sacrifices her children to the god Tlaloc and the goddess Tonantzín. She cries out for her children, "Ayy mis hijos. It is time for me to join you" (35), and throws herself into the lake as well. At the close of Xochitl's story, the stage directions read, "*As XOCHITL reaches the lake and drowns herself, LA LLORONA, a horrific and monstrous woman with golden hair and a deformed face, comes out of the tree*" (35). Xochitl's death creates La Llorona, a monstrous, legendary figure who importantly bears no physical resemblance to Xochitl.

The spectacle of this moment shifts the play toward what Aristotle would term the monstrous, but by the end of the play, it is clear that La Llorona's monstrous visage is merely a superficial imagining, and the death of Xochitl

lays the foundation for a new understanding of the La Llorona legend. Though it does not become evident until the second act, López here lays the groundwork for a recasting of La Llorona as a recuperative figure: the unconquered spirit of a mother who sacrificed all that she loved and valued in order to save her children from conquest. The scene rapidly shifts back to the child Xochimilco, awakened from her sleep by the wail of La Llorona. La Llorona reaches out for Xochimilco, who is terrified. Juana attempts to comfort her daughter and reassure her that her vision was a dream, and La Llorona remains, unseen by Juana but continually reaching her bloody hands out for Xochimilco. The act closes with Juana and Xochimilco walking away from their home and La Llorona following.

When Act 2 opens, Xochimilco is a widowed mother of five, living in 1938 Texas and working in a pecan-shelling factory. Her story holds many parallels to Xochitl's. Unlike Xochitl's, however, the events of Xochimilco's story are presented out of order. Instead of a linear progression from compliant conversion to defiant resistance, Act two presents the struggle of a mother to come to terms with what must be done. The opening of the second act presents Xochimilco, preparing to leave her home in the middle of the night. Her oldest child, Marina, stops her. The child recognizes her mother's sadness and connects it to the sadness she recalls in her father just before his death. Xochimilco tells her "if God gives me permission, I promise I won't leave you" (39). Marina, not wanting to go back to sleep, asks for a story, and Xochimilco tells her a much-abbreviated version of the La Llorona story. Unlike the version

Juana told her daughter, Xochimilco's account leaves out the jealousy and betrayal, as well as the violence of the infanticide. Instead, she recounts the version of the story that is used to warn children against bad behavior.

La Llorona is the spirit of a woman, all dressed in white, who roams by the rivers looking for her dead children who she killed a long time ago ... So where there are rivers, she roams by, looking for her children. And when she sees children misbehaving, she comes and pulls them out of their beds by their feet and takes them with her. (40)

Already in this act, López provides a somewhat diluted interpretation of La Llorona. The audience cannot help but hear this retelling through the lens of Xochitl's story, making La Llorona a non-threatening, sympathetic character rather than a violent and jealous damned spirit. As Xochimilco heads into the streets, looking for an address, López keeps La Llorona present for the audience through the staging, "*As she walks by herself, the wind whispers and '¡Ayy mis hijos!' can almost be heard*" (41). At this point, nothing is revealed about Xochimilco's destination except that she feels conflicted about what she is going there to do.

The action moves to a flashback of Xochimilco working in the pecan-shelling plant with other Chicanas. The women discuss the challenges of their working conditions, and the youngest of them, Emma, suggests complaining collectively to the management in order to demand better conditions and better pay. This character is based on the historical figure Emma Tenayuca, who led



the pecan worker strikes in 1938 in San Antonio, Texas (McCulloh). When Chris, the white supervisor, approaches the women, it is immediately evident that his relationship with Xochimilco goes beyond worker and manager. This is confirmed in the next scene, as Chris and Xochimilco embrace in a motel bed.

As Chris and Xochimilco talk, threads of La Malinche's story come into ever-sharper focus. Xochimilco optimistically believes in Chris's intention to marry her and care for her and her children. As she raises concerns about working conditions at the plant, however, it quickly becomes apparent that he has no intention of making their relationship public. Instead, he attempts to use her to get information about the workers and the possibility that they will strike when wages are reduced, and he warns her to stay away from Emma, whom he says is a communist. When Chris finally admits that he can't marry Xochimilco because she's Mexican, Xochimilco responds, "I can't stand hiding like this. I feel like a traitor" (47). She is aware of her own tenuous position, and she stages her own resistance by leaving the motel room, telling Chris, "I'm too old to play your whore" (47). While Xochimilco, like Xochitl, has embraced an alliance with the colonizing force—in this case the white boss—she holds a degree of skepticism from the outset, and does not meekly accept her status as a lesser being in the face of the white man.

The scene immediately shifts back to Xochimilco, outside the address she was looking for earlier. A woman, Serafina, invites her in and asks her, "Are you sure you want to do this?" Xochimilco does not immediately answer, and the scene shifts again, to the factory. Emma attempts to recruit Xochimilco

into the Workers Alliance. Xochimilco is initially resistant, and asks why Emma thinks she would help. Though Xochimilco demonstrates less naïveté than did Xochitl, it is still evident that she wants to believe that her alliance with Chris was the right choice. She is unwilling to step easily from the path, and Emma's efforts to convert her to the cause echo Texcoco's entreaties to Xochitl in the first act. Emma tells her Chris is married, and Xochimilco's response carries an awareness of La Llorona in it, "Oh, so now I'm supposed to be so jealous and enraged that I will help you out of revenge?" (50) When Emma persists, naming Chris's wife and informing Xochimilco that he has two children, Xochimilco weeps, then reveals management's plan to reduce the workers' wages.

By the next scene, the strike is being planned, and the women prepare to leave work with the intention of attending a planning meeting. Xochimilco realizes she has left her purse in the factory, but when she returns to the darkened factory to retrieve it, Chris is there. Initially, they flirt, and Xochimilco falls into the familiarity of their physical attraction. Before long, however, she snaps back into an awareness of the consequences of her actions, and refuses his advances. Rejected, Chris refuses to let Xochimilco take her purse with her. She attempts to be nonchalant about it, but he, as a white man, recognizes the importance of her green card. "You're willing to give up your green card so easily? If the Immigration Patrol catches you without one, they're going to take you back to your backward country, you little commie" (53). He accuses her of acting as a spy for Emma, then tries to charm her into having sex with him. She kicks him and tries to flee, but he pins her to a table

and rapes her, saying, “Let’s see how much of a fighter you are after I get through with you.”(54) Like the Spanish Friar from the first act, Chris’s intention is to take over not just the body, but also the spirit, of the woman he rapes.

We hear Xochimilco screaming, and the scene shifts into the future yet again. We discover that she was standing outside of Serafina’s because she had come to have an abortion. Xochimilco is on the table, legs spread, as the abortion is performed. Serafina tells her that she was going to have twins, and Xochimilco, weak and bleeding, goes back into the street. She collapses onto the ground and cries out for her lost children. “¡Ayyyy mis hijos!” La Llorona appears to her, frightening her, and she gets up and runs to the church to seek forgiveness.

Through her rejection of Chris, Xochimilco has thrown off the man who wielded economic and social power over her and cast aside the persona of Malinche. She has also chosen, painfully, to sacrifice the unborn children conceived during her rape for the welfare of her living children. Yet she remains both physically and spiritually broken as she enters the church and is confronted by a priest. He agrees to hear her confession, but when he learns of her “sin,” he beats her to death.

*Lights change, and so does XOCHIMILCO’s reality. The PRIEST takes out a whip and starts whipping her.)*

PRIEST: Scream for your children! *(He whips her harder.*

*XOCHIMILCO cannot escape. She gets whipped for every attempt to*

*flee. Blood drips between her legs.)* Scream for your children,  
sinner! (*XOCHIMILCO tries to walk out of the church.*)

XOCHIMILCO: ¡¡¡Ayyy mis hijos!!!

PRIEST: Louder! Louder so that everyone can hear you! (*The  
PRIEST whips her even harder.*)

XOCHIMILCO: ¡¡¡¡Ayyy mis hijos!!!! (*XOCHIMILCO falls to the floor.  
She is left on the floor, bloody and lifeless. Blackout.*)(57-58)

Xochimilco's spiritual and physical death is the result of first Chris's and then the Catholic Church's exertion of both physical and spiritual power over her. The representatives of white patriarchy have effectively conquered her. She is awakened by two brown angels, who invite her to "Get ready to meet your God" (58). The voice of Xochimilco's God is male and female at once, and it comforts her and provides her with both absolution and empowerment. Revived, Xochimilco no longer perceives La Llorona as a terrifying figure. In an echo of the vision Xochimilco had as a young girl, La Llorona appears and reaches out for her. This time, Xochimilco takes her hand, and La Llorona provides her support as she goes home to her children. The echoes of the endings of both *Oedipus at Colonnus* and the *Oresteia* here help to emphasize the play's link to the tragic tradition, but unlike the Greek tragedies, López's play does not end here. Instead, Xochimilco brings her newly-developed sense of empowerment back into her life and resists Chris's and the factory owner's continued efforts to conquer her and her fellow workers.

Xochimilco's spiritual awakening is most evident when she returns to work and is confronted by Chris, who attempts once again to shame and frighten her. He wields his economic advantage over her like a weapon, but rather than cower and acquiesce, she climbs onto a table and accuses him, loudly and publicly. Collectively, this group of poor Chicanas turns against the white boss, and it is he who must back down, at least temporarily. After her speech, Xochimilco leaves the factory, weeping, and the remaining women, led by Emma, move to strike.

Once the strike has begun, Chris and the owners of the plant send the police to arrest Xochimilco as a communist, once again attempting to exert control over the threat of female empowerment. Rather than run away, Xochimilco decides to stand up for herself and her rights. Ultimately, she is tried, convicted, and sentenced to ten years in prison, but she has chosen that fate in order to make a statement about what she believes is right. As the play ends, Xochimilco says good-bye to her daughter, reminding the girl to "Take care of your brothers. Tell them the truth about their mother so they don't believe the lies. I will be all right if you promise me you will never be ashamed to be what you are" (66). Because she is a Chicana, her choices are limited to running away or being imprisoned. Because running away implies that her actions were wrong, Xochimilco sacrifices her own freedom in order to show her daughter that she is proud of the choices she has made. She is defiant, and therefore the "defeat" she faces in court is merely a material one. Her spirit remains unconquered.

Llorona's cry for her children, "Ayy! Mis hijos!" echoes through the play, carried from mother to mother as each woman laments the loss of her children. The play closes with Xochimilco whispering "Ayy mis hijos," and the wail of La Llorona is transformed to a quiet acknowledgement of shared pain. Tonantzín, Xochitl, and La Llorona then invite Xochimilco to join them in the tree.

About the play, Lopez has said, "All these women that you see in the play, they release themselves from the chains of oppression when they realize that they can do something. They can resist. They have a fighting spirit that releases them" (McCulloh). The women of the play are simultaneously conquered and unconquered, and they embody – and challenge—more than just the Llorona story. Each woman begins as an interpretation of the Malinche: Xochitl obeys the dictates of the Church and tries to help with the conversion of her people until the Christian god fails to protect her. Gradually, her resistance becomes manifest and visible – as her motherhood becomes apparent, so, too, does her rejection of conquest. Her body is simultaneously the site of conquest and resistance. And through her we see the spirit of the indigenous peoples and their refusal to be fully conquered.

Xochimilco is also an echo of Malinche: the mistress of a white man who wields power over her and her community. As her body and her spirit are beaten, she becomes more and more a reflection of La Llorona. Her final act of resistance is, oddly enough, to refuse to escape when it becomes apparent that the police are coming to get her. She makes the decision to stay and to stand up for what she knows is right, regardless of the fact that she will be

imprisoned, because she wants to teach her daughter not to be ashamed of her race but rather to stand up for herself and her people.

In both stories, the central character performs the La Llorona myth, “killing” her children in response to a violation on the part of a man, but instead of acting out of madness or revenge, each woman acts out of a growing sense of empowerment and a desire to do what is best for her children and for her culture. Each of the women begins her journey in the passive mode of the compliant female “other,” unaware of or complicit in the white man’s effort to control her. After she begins to consider taking an active path of resistance, but before she has truly embraced the idea of activism, it is a white man’s violent exercise of power that cements her resolve to resist her own conquest and, therefore, the conquest of her people. Ultimately, López redeems both Malinche and Llorona by presenting them as aspects of the colonized brown mother who sacrifices herself in the pursuit of what is right. They, like Tonantzín, weep for their lost children, but their stories offer the Chicana mother a kind of salvation that cannot be found in traditional models of motherhood or in conventional models of tragedy.

#### **5.4 QUEERING THE CHICANA MOTHER: CHERRÍE MORAGA’S *THE HUNGRY WOMAN: A MEXICAN MEDEA***

While Josefina López merges history with mythology in order to redeem Malinche and Llorona, Cherríe Moraga infuses an imagined future with

mythical mothers as part of her ongoing efforts to define a discursive space for the Chicana lesbian mother. Moraga sets her story in “The near future of a fictional past, dreamed only in the Chicana imagination” (10). This dystopic future grows from an imagined turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century civil war, which has divided half of the United States into smaller nations. These individual nations, divided along racial lines, seceded from the U.S. in an effort to counter “its relentless political and economic expansion, as well as the Euro-American cultural domination of all societal matters including language, religion, family and tribal structures, ethics, art-making, and more” (6). While each nation generally granted citizenship to anyone who fought on its side in the war, land ownership is largely based on ethnicity. “Several years after the revolution, a counter-revolution followed ... Hierarchies were established between male and female; and queer folk were unilaterally sent into exile” (6). The site of this exile is what remains of Phoenix, Arizona. The queer folk, the *jotería*, of every color live together in the desert, and most of the action of the play takes place in this bordered wasteland, this non-place inhabited by those cast out of their “homelands.”

In this mythical future, Moraga constructs a syncretic tragedy that ultimately dismantles the mythology of motherhood and indicts the heterosexism of Chicano culture. Her critique is not, however, limited to Chicano culture. She is also responding both politically and formally to the structures of control exerted by Western cultural norms. She vocalizes a



critique of the Aristotelian model of tragedy, for example, based on a political objection to its form and, more importantly, its context:

... not until I read the Marxism of Brecht, then Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed," does my discomfort with the Aristotelian system begin to make any sense. Aristotle created his poetics within the context of a slave-based economy, an imperialist democracy, not unlike the corporate-controlled democracy we are witnessing in the United States today. (Moraga, Interview)

Her tragedy, then, actively contests a hegemonic form while simultaneously engaging with elements of that form.

#### **5.4.1 CHICANA LESBIAN MOTHERHOOD: RESISTING REJECTIONS OF THE SELF**

In all these plays that scandalized traditional audiences, Moraga opened the door to a new Latina theater by incorporating the shock of sexuality, debunking Catholicism, breaking sexual taboos, and staging the scars of incest and rape. Not only do her protagonists graphically acknowledge their women's bodies, they speak through them in order to represent lesbianism and difference. (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 72)

Because the play is so intensely political, understanding Moraga's intent and tactics in this play requires understanding her racial, social, and political context. Cherrie Moraga identifies herself as a *mestiza*—her mother was

Chicana and her father Anglo—and as a lesbian. She embodies the “bordered” existence, with one foot in each culture and at home in neither. In her autobiographical books of prose, Moraga addresses the internalized self-loathing she experienced thanks to the conflicting forces within herself and her family. Her mother, for example, enforced the more heavily male-centered Chicano ways of life within her home, forcing Moraga and her sister to wait on her teenaged brother and his friends, but valued “white” education and behaviors in her children. In this way, Moraga learned that she should reject the Chicana part of her.

This rejection of self is compounded by Moraga’s status as a Chicana lesbian. More than in mainstream white American culture, homosexuality is viewed negatively in Chicano/a culture. Some Chicano/as consider homosexuality a vehicle for genocide, brought into the culture from the dominant white culture of the US, and homosexuals are viewed with suspicion and even rage (Tatonetti, 232). Much of the method and content of *The Hungry Woman* is a critique of both the racial self-hatred that Moraga experienced in her mother and the Chicano nationalist rhetoric that taught her to hate herself for her sexuality. As a fair-skinned Chicana with Anglo roots, Moraga turns her attentions on the Aztec, Mexican, and Western (Greek) mythologies. These are the pieces she recognizes in herself. Her mythology is all three of these.

#### 5.4.2 THE HUNGRY WOMAN: HYBRID MYTHOLOGY, HYBRID FORM

The Hungry Woman lived “in the place where the spirits live,” and she suffered from an insatiable hunger, crying constantly for food. According to the myth, this woman had mouths all over her body, which cried to be fed even when the spirits, in an effort to satisfy her, turned her into the earth. And so, today, sometimes what we take to be the sound of the wind is actually the Hungry Woman’s wailing for food. Moraga relates the wailing of the Hungry Woman to La Llorona’s, crying not for her children but for “sustenance.”

And at last, upon encountering this myth—this pre-capitalist, pre-colonial, pre-catholic mito—my jornada began to make sense. This is the original Llorona y tiene mucha hambre [and she is very hungry]. I realized that she has been the subject of my work all along, from my earliest writings, my earliest feminism ... We, Chicanas, remember them in spite of ourselves, and our families' and society's efforts to have us forget. (“Looking for the Insatiable Woman”, 145)

Moraga wants to tell a story that reclaims Chicana identity from the patriarchal definition imposed on it, one that breaks free of “Chicano cultural nationalism: ... *indigenismo*, a privileging of unity over internal difference, and a conservative ideology of the family” (Hames-Garcia, 104) and steps away from “the trap of the colonized reader forever reacting against the dominant” (Anzaldúa, “Too Queer the Writer” 252, quoted in Tatonetti 228). “As the *malinchista* in Chicano culture, the ‘rejected lesbian’ ... rends the boundaries of ‘normal’ sexuality and seeks to destabilize the hegemony of both heterosexist

and Chicano nationalist ideology” (Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje* 156). Moraga struggles against the nationalist rhetoric that puts Chicano before self, that defines her as a failure to her race because she does not fit a conventional definition of motherhood. *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* constitutes her retaliation against the messages of self-hatred she receives from her family and her culture.

In the course of the play, Moraga engages with an array of mythical mothers both familiar and obscure. In doing so, she highlights the extent to which Chicana motherhood is externally constructed. The title of the play defines the extreme edges of Moraga’s range of mythical references. The mythical Hungry Woman is at the center of a little-known ancient Nahua creation myth, and Medea is one of the most recognizable mother figures in western mythology. Most tellingly, over the course of the play, Medea embodies all of the possible maternal archetypes, and their coexistence in one queer Chicana mother demonstrates the failure of considering motherhood in an essentialist way.

Medea, a queer Chicana mother, lives in Phoenix with her lover, Luna, her son, Chac-Mool, and her grandmother, Mama Sal. She and the others were cast out of Aztlán, the Chicano nation, when Medea’s husband, Jasón, caught her in bed with Luna. The action of the play itself is mainly split between Medea’s present, in a prison psychiatric ward, and her immediate past, in Phoenix. Within these two contexts, the play also reaches into Medea’s memory of her life as Jasón’s wife and into a spiritual other-world. Structurally, the

play moves fluidly between times and places, often crossing boundaries of time and space multiple times within a single scene. This fluidity emphasizes the play's mythic quality and Medea's position as a larger-than-life tragic figure.

Moraga infuses the play with ritual, providing a performative example of Ana Castillo's assertion that "by reclaiming indigenous ritual practices and reinventing them for contemporary political purposes, Chicanas can transform their victimization into spiritual, political, and sexual power" (García, Alma 285). The play opens with a story, told in verse by "Coatlicue, the Aztec Goddess of Creation and Destruction" (10), portrayed by one of the four Cihuatateo who make up the play's chorus. "This is how all stories begin and end," she says, and the story she tells is of a boy child conceived from an eagle feather "in the dark sea of Medea / at the dawning of an age" (10). From this opening moment, Moraga transports her audience to "a prison psychiatric hospital in the borderlands" (10), where the character Medea talks with her nurse (again played by a chorus member) about the possibility of her son's resurrection from the dead.

Moraga bombards her audience with mythological references that cross religions, cultures, and nations. The child conceived from a feather is the child of Coatlicue: Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war and the sun. The Cihuatateo are warrior women from Aztec mythology who supposedly died during childbirth. Medea is a character from Greek mythology, primarily recognizable because of Euripides's dramatization of her. The potential resurrection of her son creates a link to the Christian Jesus and Virgin Mary.

Thus, within the first page of the script, Moraga establishes her work as hybrid, and a reflection of her own hybrid self, composed of pieces of the colonizing culture (White America and the western theatrical tradition) and the colonized (Mexico and the Aztec tradition). Her play, however, like Moraga herself, is more than a hybridization—a piecing together of two cultures in a work of art. Though Moraga weaves Mexican mythology, storytelling, and ritual together with formal elements from a western dramatic form (tragedy), she is not simply demonstrating the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized. In *The Hungry Woman*, these tensions exist as part of the underlying assumption on which the world is built. Moraga goes further by using elements of two cultures to critique both and create something new, in an effort to highlight the problems of the bordered existence for Chicanas, particularly Chicana lesbian mothers.

Moraga looks around from the bordered space in which she exists and takes from each of her cultural reference points that which is useful to her effort. With these pieces, she creates a whole, which works primarily to make the point that there is nowhere, within the bordered space or outside of it, that a woman who defies the archetypal notions of Chicana femininity can feel accepted.

Christopher Balme defines theatrical syncretism, in part, as “the combination and amalgamation of indigenous performance forms within the framework of the Western notion of theatre” (1). Balme’s broad definition of performance includes mythological story-telling from the oral tradition. Using

this definition, it becomes clear that Moraga's play functions as syncretic, as it takes a Western performance form and infuses it with reinventions of the mythology of multiple cultures. Moraga's status as outsider, partial member of two cultures yet not fully accepted by either, places her in a position to create such a syncretic literature.

Moraga utilizes elements of Greek drama in her play, including a chorus and verse choral passages, stichomythia, and soliloquies. There are eight actors: one plays each of the four major characters, Medea, Luna, Chac-mool, and Mama Sal; and a Chorus of four women who act both as chorus and as all other characters in the play. As is true of many Greek tragic figures, including Euripides' Medea, Moraga's Medea's hubris contributes strongly to the tragic turn of the play, and the action of the play is to a certain extent carried along by something outside of the main characters' control. Moraga differentiates her work from the body of Greek tragedy, however, in the extent of her focus on the relationship between the protagonist and her community. Her critique of the external forces beyond Medea's control is similar to Euripides', but she approaches Medea's "otherness" quite differently. Euripides positions Medea as a woman rejected by those around her, and he centers the action of the play almost exclusively around her presence on stage. Moraga positions Medea as part of a community of characters who are also sympathetic and who are also rejected by their homeland. Moraga's Medea has allowed her pain and bitterness to poison her relationships with those who share her exile.

### 5.4.3 THE MEXICAN MEDEA: IMAGINING AZTLÁN

In the represented past that is Medea's life in Phoenix, Moraga immediately shows us Medea's hopelessness and discontent. Luna, Chac-Mool, and Mama Sal have begun to make a life for themselves, but Medea, who acted as a leader in the Chicano revolution, cannot move past resentment over her exile by the people for whom she fought. She is a fallen warrior, and the loss of her homeland has broken her spirit. She drinks too much tequila, avoids her work as *curandera* (healer) and *partera* (midwife), and fights with Luna. Her misery and her anger are palpable, and she resists the efforts her loved ones make to help her accept her new life and move forward.

To further complicate Medea's situation, Chac-Mool is about to turn 13. In the early part of the play, we learn that Chac-Mool's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday will mark a potential moment of choice for him. If his father invites him, he can choose to claim his place as a man in the Aztlán. Doing so will mean leaving Medea behind, and she warns him that he will not be able to return to her for four years. Medea's anxiety about and resistance to the possibility that Chac-Mool will leave reveals much about the loss of her sense of self-worth and her diminished status in the eyes of her former nation.

When Jasón invites Chac-Mool to join him in Aztlán, Medea recognizes that his motivation is purely economic. The laws regarding land rights in Aztlán will not allow the mostly-white Jasón to continue to hold Medea's lands, so he needs his son, with Medea's blood, to give validity to his claim. Chac-Mool idealistically tells his mother that he wants to go back to Aztlán so that he can



show them how wrong they are to reject her, but Medea is sure that, once in Aztlán, Chac-Mool will be indoctrinated and will learn to reject her as all of her people have. Medea decides, ultimately, that she needs to kill her son in order to protect him (and herself) from his inevitable indoctrination. It is this infanticide that causes her to be imprisoned in the prison psychiatric ward in the play's present.

Moraga's imagined Aztlán contrasts starkly with the utopic homeland figured in Chicano nationalist literature and rhetoric as the mythical homeland of the Chicano people. For the Chicana lesbian, Aztlán is not a welcoming homeland but a site of rejection, and for Medea, Aztlán represents everything she has lost by loving Luna. When Aztlán threatens to take her son, as well, Medea can no longer bear it; she goes to extreme lengths to prevent what she perceives as his rejection of her.

#### **5.4.4 MEDEA'S MYTHICAL DOUBLES**

As I have mentioned, Moraga infuses her title character with many mythical mother figures over the course of the play. These mythical mother figures include: Medea, La Llorona, a Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, Coatlicue, and the Hungry Woman. Because of the play's heavily non-linear structure, I will explore the manifestations of each of these figures in the character of Medea rather than attempting a start-to-finish reading of the play.

Through her dramaturgy, Moraga acknowledges the possibility that her audience will not be familiar with the Nahua myths she references. She

recreates, retells, or explicates the stories of Coatlicue, The Hungry Woman, and the Cihuatateo within the performance of the play. By specifically not retelling the stories of Malinche, Llorona, and Guadalupe, however, Moraga demonstrates an expectation that her audience is familiar with those stories, which are actively transmitted within Chicano culture, as Euripides' audience would have been familiar with the myths surrounding Jason and his accursed family. By utilizing both indigenous myths less commonly transmitted and myths more commonly known to contemporary Chicano/as, Moraga accomplishes two things: acquainting her audience with the roots of its current mythology of motherhood; and challenging that mythology.

La Llorona, the Hungry Woman, the Dismemberment of Coyolxauhqui—these are the stories that have shaped us. We, Chicanas, remember them in spite of ourselves, and our families' and society's efforts to have us forget. We remember these stories where mothers worked in factories, not fields and children played in city plunges, not country creeks. The body remembers. (Moraga, Interview)

It's likely that Moraga's original audience at Berkeley (where the play was commissioned in 1995) and her subsequent contemporary US audiences included both members who had no prior experience with Mexican and Nahua mythologies of motherhood and members who were familiar with even the more obscure myths presented. Moraga has made it clear in interviews that the audience she had in mind when writing the piece was Chicanas: women whose

self-definitions are determined in large part by the mythology Moraga challenges, and women who would likely at least recognize the conflation of Medea with both Malinche and Llorona.

The parallels between the Mexican and Greek Medeas are perhaps the most overt in the play, given that Moraga has structured her play as a reinterpretation of the Greek tragedy. Medea's name, as well as her husband's (Jasón), come from Euripides, as does some of Medea's backstory. Like the Greek Medea, Moraga's Medea is a warrior woman who, after fighting for her husband's cause, finds herself exiled from her homeland and set adrift in a foreign land. Both Medeas are rejected by those they had considered family, and both find that their husband is now planning to marry someone more "suitable," though in the Mexican Medea's case, this is neither surprising nor an abandonment on his part. The Greek Medea is a sorceress; the Mexican Medea is a lesbian *curandera* (*curanderas*, like midwives, have a history of being equated with witches by the patriarchy). She is an outsider to those in Aztlán because she is a lesbian, but she is a foreigner in the place she must live. Both Medeas choose to kill their children rather than allow them to be taken away from them.

Like the Greek Medea, Moraga's Medea has acted as a warrior: she fought alongside the people of Aztlán to break free from the white culture, and yet she finds herself exiled from the homeland she fought to create, based on the incompatibility between her sexuality and the anti-homosexual laws of her country. Jasón cites "politics" as the thing that destroyed their relationship and

led to Medea's exile. Mama Sal and Savannah explain the shift in the status of women that happened between the war and the present:

MAMA SAL: ... Pan-indigenismo tore America apart and Aztlán was born from the *pedacitos* [little pieces].

SAVANNAH: Uniting the disenfranchised diaspora of Indian-mestizos throughout the Southwest.

MAMA SAL: We were *contentos* for a while—

SAVANNAH: Sort of. Until the revolutionaries told the women, "Put down your guns and pick up your babies."

...

MAMA SAL: Just like the *Gringo* [white man] and *Gachupín* [Spanish colonial settler] before them.

...

SAVANNAH: And then en masse, all the colored countries—

MAMA SAL: Threw out their *jotería* [cast-offs].

SAVANNAH: Queers of every color and shade and definition.

MAMA SAL: *Y los homos* became *peregrinos ... como* nomads [and the gays became migratory, like nomads], just like our Aztec ancestors a thousand years ago. (23-24)

In this exchange, Moraga links the exile of the homosexuals from Aztlán to the myth surrounding the exile of Aztecs from Aztlán. The story of the Aztecs' exile from their homeland is part of Chicano Nationalist rhetoric, and it therefore is

powerful that Moraga uses it here in connection with the Chicano nation's exile of homosexuals.

Moraga's Medea retains much of the cold detachment and self-absorption of Euripides' version, but this aspect of her character manifests more in her relationship with her lover, Luna, than in her relationship with her son. Moraga's Medea is not cruel. She is desperate, and the separation from her homeland has driven her mad, but she acts without malice. She alienates Luna, but their love is evident in the lasting regrets each has over the loss of the other, implying that Medea is not, at her core, cold and disloyal, but is rather operating in an altered state of being because of the many stresses she is under.

In order to understand the connection between Medea and La Malinche, we must take into account Jasón's racial conundrum. Though he, like Medea, fought for Aztlán in the civil war, his mixed blood has been determined to be too white to qualify him for ownership of land in his new nation. When he was married to Medea, her indigenous blood held their land, but since her exile, his claim to the land has been tenuous. We learn over the course of the play that he is planning to marry a young Indian girl, but that he fears he will lose Medea's land. When Jasón meets up with Medea in a "border hotel" to discuss her "status," he seduces her with the implication that, through him, she can gain back her place in Aztlán. Like La Malinche, however, Medea finds that her actions ultimately hurt those whom she wanted to help, and there is no reward – Jasón has no intention of allowing her to return to her previous status in

Aztlán. Instead of gaining back her homeland, Medea loses the respect of her lover and her son by giving up her body in the pursuit of home.

CHAC-MOOL: You're crazy. He's right. He told me you were crazy.

He met me at the border. He told me to come with him right then.

MEDEA: You should have.

CHAC-MOOL: I didn't. I didn't because you taught me loyalty.

Because I wasn't going to sneak away from you like a punk. When I leave here tomorrow, I'm walking out that door like a man.

MEDEA: A man.

CHAC-MOOL: Yeah, a man. Just the way you taught me. You fucked him, I didn't. You fucked yourself. (86)

In his parting words in this scene, Chac-Mool identifies both Medea's failure of loyalty and her position as La Chingada (the fucked one). His words identify her as an aspect of La Malinche, but the audience recognizes the pain she suffers as a result of her actions. Rather than rejecting Malinche as traitor to her race, Moraga validates the pain of a mother trying to find a way home for herself and her child.

Medea's madness, identified above by Chac-Mool, remains at the forefront throughout the play, particularly in light of her incarceration in a psychiatric ward in the present. The figure of an insane mother who murders her child(ren) is, of course, a reference to La Llorona, a character Moraga has spoken of attempting to redeem through this play. Like many Chicana feminists', Moraga's version of La Llorona's story gives the main character a

somewhat more compelling reason for the infanticide she commits. In a speech given in 1995 before the completion of *The Mexican Medea*, Moraga explains that, unlike most Chicanas, she did not hear the story of La Llorona as she was growing up. Instead, she first heard this story in her adulthood, from a woman who worked with lesbians in prison. Moraga became interested in the phenomenon of infanticide.

Moraga's focus is on granting a different kind of agency to her Medea/Llorona than exists in the mythology created by members of the patriarchy. Instead of being purely reactionary – having her actions determined entirely by her personal emotional response to rejection and infidelity on the part of one man, Moraga's Llorona/Medea character kills her child to protect him from induction into the patriarchy that rejects and betrays all Chicanas, and most particularly lesbian Chicanas.

After Chac-Mool's death in the play, Medea's wail of grief and loss is La Llorona's: "Ay! Mi hijo!" The chorus of Cihuatateo pick up the cry and make it plural: "Ay! Mis hijos!" This shift from personal grief to collective grief is an important aspect of Moraga's handling of the myth. Medea's experience is not only hers: Moraga wants us to recognize Medea's tragedy as one shared by all Chicanas, the limits of whose personhood is culturally defined through the myths Moraga dismantles in the play.

At the act break, Moraga connects Medea/Malinche to Medea/Coatlicue, ending Act I with Medea's decision to have sex with Jasón after he has promised her that he will give her back her place in Aztlán, and beginning Act

II with a scene in which Medea, Luna, and Chac-Mool reenact the Coatlicue story (Medea as Coatlicue, Luna as Coyolxauhqui, Chac-Mool as Huitzilopotchli). The Cihuatateo narrate the events, explaining to the audience that

CIHUATATEO EAST: A long time ago, before the Aztec war of the flowers, before war, Coatlicue, la mera madre diosa, was sweeping on top of the mountain, Coatepec, when she encounters two delicate plumitas. She stuffs the feathers into her apron, thinking later she might weave them into a cloth for her altar. But suddenly, secretly, the feathers begin to gestate there by her womb, y de repente, Coatlicue, goddess of Creation and Destruction, becomes pregnant. (55)

Luna-as-Coyolxauhqui conspires with the “Four Hundred Stars” to kill the pregnant Medea-as-Coatlicue, but Chac-Mool-as-Huitzilopotchli intervenes.

*(The Birth of the Aztec sun-god, Huitzilopotchli, is enacted. CHAC-MOOL as the sun-god emerges, in full Aztec regalia, from the icon/woman, COATLICUE.)*

CIHUATATEO EAST: Pero, Huitzilopotchli, that’s him, el diosito inside Coatlicue, he ain’t gonna punk out on his mami. A hummingbird buzzes by and gives the little sun-god the 4-1-1 about the planned matricide, and the vatito is quick to respond.

HUITZILOPOTCHLI: Cuenta conmigo, jefa. I got it all under control.



*(Brother and sister, HUITZILOPOTCHLI and COYOLXAUHQUI, as the gods of day and night, battle for dominion over the heavens.)*

CIHUATATEO EAST: With filero flying, Huitzilopotchli chops off his sister's head. (56)

Once Coyolxauhqui has been dismembered, as in the myth, her head is thrown into the heavens and she becomes the moon.

COATLICUE: La Luna!

CIHUATATEO EAST: This is how all nights begin and end. (57)

This restaging of the myth of Coatlicue, immediately after Medea has decided to betray Luna in order to ensure that she can remain with Chac-Mool, emphasizes the crisis Medea faces, and makes manifest Medea's desire to frame her betrayal of Luna as a necessary sacrifice. In the myth, Coatlicue commits no offense apart from becoming spontaneously pregnant, but Coyolxauhqui leads her siblings in a plot to kill their mother and prevent the birth of the sun-god. Coyolxauhqui's sacrifice is necessary and justified. In the play, Medea contends with her guilt over betraying Luna by recalling the myth in an attempt to convince herself that she did what had to be done.

Immediately after this reenactment, Medea laments to the psychiatric nurse that Luna did not come to visit her, further emphasizing her efforts to shift blame for the demise of their relationship to Luna.

In addition to addressing mythology rooted in the Nahua heritage of Mexicans/Chicano/as, Moraga acknowledges the problem of Catholicism's

influence in the formation of Chicana identity through references to confession and to the third dominant female figure in Chicano/a mythology: The Virgin Mary/Guadalupe. Moraga acknowledges and ridicules the valuation of sexual purity early in the play when Medea and Luna are disturbed and disgusted by a letter from Jason in which he tells Medea that his new wife “bled for me, just as you did once” (15). In a more general reference to the influence of Catholicism in the culture, Moraga equates border crossing with the sacrament of confession throughout the play (Mayorga 156). In order to cross into Aztlán, characters must offer confession to the Border Guard. As Chac Mool crosses to see his father, the Border Guard grills him about his tattoo and his given name, which he confesses is Adolf. As Luna attempts to cross on a visit to see Medea in the penitentiary, she must confess that she is a lesbian.

Finally, and most blatantly, Moraga offers a visual reference to Mary and Jesus in the pieta pose assumed twice by Medea and Chac-Mool. By specifically posing Medea and Chac-Mool in an imitation of this famous religious image, Moraga adds layers of interpretation to the circumstances of Chac-Mool’s and Medea’s deaths. Positioning first one of them, then the other, as the crucified Christ figure in the pose indicates both of them as martyrs whose deaths grant some kind of freedom to their people. As Moraga (through Medea) figures it, Chac-Mool’s martyrdom interrupts the transmission of Chicano patriarchal values/homophobia/misogyny from one generation to the next, opening the possibility for a redefinition of gender interactions. Medea’s martyrdom is somewhat more blatant: Moraga offers Medea up as a tragic

figure through whom Chicanas can redefine the available construction of woman- and motherhood. Medea dies, according to Moraga, “because [tragedy] teaches deeper and harder than happy” (Moraga, Interview).

Most notably in the redrawing of the myths, Moraga’s Medea does not kill her son as an act of revenge or malice against Jasón. She kills him because she has no hope that his father’s world holds any promise for him, and she feels certain that he will lose himself and ultimately learn to forget and deny her. She kills him without physical violence. The visual image of Medea holding her son in the pieta pose emphasizes the killing as an act of love and not one of malice. She holds her son tenderly—none of the Greek Medea’s angry explanations to Jason—the moment after the murder is one of gentleness and peace. The fact that the ghost of Chac-Mool returns to Medea at the end of the play and takes her “home” with him shows that he understands the truth and sees her not as a murderer, but rather as a strong, suffering woman. In freeing Medea, Moraga frees La Llorona in all of her many guises, lifting the onus of infanticide from womankind and highlighting the ways a bordered life can lead a woman into such an act. Medea has traces of La Llorona’s weeping as she lives on in the prison mental hospital, but unlike La Llorona, Medea does not remain trapped in the earthly plain. Chac-mool’s spirit returns in a (forgiving) moment and offers her the same release from her life that she offered to him.

With this play, Moraga contests what has existed and offers something new in its place. Although the play takes place in a dystopic world, the creation of a Mexican Medea that is so many mythological figures and none of them at

the same time highlights the fact that mythical mothers have a shared role: to transmit cultural expectations, regardless of their appropriateness. In place of these patriarchally-constructed myths, Moraga offers the audience a new mythology and provides a new perspective on all of the women at once.

Through her reconstruction of the Chicana mother as all mythical mothers and yet none of them, Moraga places the burden of guilt for the tragedy in this play on the cultures that created the myths, and gives Medea absolution.

Instead of the heartless, calculating, or heavily manipulated women offered by conventional western, Chicano, and Nahua mythologies, Moraga paints Medea as strong, intelligent, and loving, though deeply flawed. Moraga endows Medea with hubris, but not malice, and gives La Llorona a way to stop wandering the world searching for her lost children. She allows us to connect with Medea's desire to go home, to be freed from the literal borderlands to which she has been exiled, to belong somewhere, in one culture or the other, but Moraga offers us no easy solution to the problem of the bordered life. Neither Gringolandia nor Aztlán will be kind to Medea, Luna, Mama Sal, and Chac-Mool. The borderlands is the only place they can be allowed to exist.

## **5.5 TRAGIC RECUPERATIONS OF THE MATERNAL**

Both Josefina López and Cherrie Moraga recuperate La Llorona and La Malinche in their efforts to challenge not just the construction of Chicana identity, but also the social situation of the Chicana. López's play primarily

focuses on shedding light on the history of systemic conquest and oppression of the indigenous woman at the hands of the white man. Moraga's takes on issues of race, gender, sexuality, and even economics as she explores the crisis of a Chicana lesbian in a world divided by race and determined by male domination and heteronormativity. These plays, written in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrate both the growing maturity of Chicana playwriting in general and the continuing impulse to use theatre as a vehicle for social critique. By adopting formal elements from Aristotelian tragedy, Brechtian epic theatre, and the Chicano tradition of agit-prop theatre, these Chicana playwrights position themselves in conversation with western, male dramatic traditions, but instead of merely adopting prescribed forms, the playwrights use elements of existing forms to create their own, uniquely Chicana, dramaturgy.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION: TOWARD A HISTORY OF CHICANA THEATRE**

For centuries, La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona have been a part of the mythology of Mexican, and later Chicana, motherhood. Held up as either ideals to aspire to or warnings against feminine failings, these figures have long defined the imagined limits of motherhood for Mexican and Chicana women. As the Chicano nationalist movement emerged, these figures continued to be used to contain women, but Chicana feminists began contesting these patriarchally-imposed limitations on their potential as women and as mothers by reclaiming the mythic maternal and reimagining the myths to create an understanding of motherhood that is grounded more in the lived experience of mothering. This impulse to reinterpret the mythology and rewrite the characters became evident immediately in the work of Chicana theatre artists and playwrights when they started creating plays and performance pieces of their own. For the past four decades, the figures of La Virgen, La Malinche, and La Llorona have been deployed in Chicana feminist drama, in a range of ways and for a range of reasons. In addition, Chicana feminists have sought ways to reimagine pre-Columbian goddesses in order to emphasize the power of the maternal and to reclaim a lost understanding of motherhood as a lived,

empowering experience for women. Through the work of Chicana collectives like Teatro de Las Chicanas and playwrights from Denise Chávez to Josefina Lopez to Cherrie Moraga, the construction of Chicana motherhood on stage has been transformed. Rather than the tightly-constrained images of Virgin and Whore that were present in the work of the male-run *teatros*, Chicana feminists have defined a broad category of motherhood that allows for and embraces the many possibilities of mothering.

In the course of this dissertation, I have traced the development of the Chicana theatre in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with particular focus on the Chicana feminist response to scenarios of motherhood that have defined and constrained Chicana identity for centuries. We have seen how the mythical maternal was deployed to control Chicana feminism in the early years of the Chicano Nationalist (and Chicano Theatre) Movement, and how Chicanas struggled to gain access to the stage in any but supporting roles. We have explored Chicanas' early attempts to communicate their concerns in a performative context, and how those early attempts grew into a strong tradition of Chicana drama. We have seen Chicanas and their characters communicating the challenges of identity formation in the borderlands, expressing anxieties about religion and motherhood, defying cultural norms, weeping, sacrificing themselves, saving themselves, and finding power in mothers both contemporary and ancient. I have, I hope, shown that mothers and motherhood loom large in the Chicana imagination and in their lived experience and have been a focal point for the Chicana drama.

I chose to focus this dissertation on manifestations of the mythical maternal both because they are ubiquitous in Chicana cultural production and because the Chicana feminist project of reclaiming these mythical mothers speaks to me as a scholar and as a mother. I have drawn what I hope is a coherent through-line from the beginning of the Chicano Theatre Movement to the Chicana tragedies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, tracing notable shifts in form and idea along the way. But the mythical maternal is not the whole story, to be sure, and the work of some Chicana playwrights and performance artists defies the chronology I have constructed in this dissertation. This dissertation is, of necessity, only a small part of the greater project of chronicling the history of Chicana theatre. Details have been excluded, plays chosen from many; there is a much larger story to tell—one that defies the constraints of a single dissertation.



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